

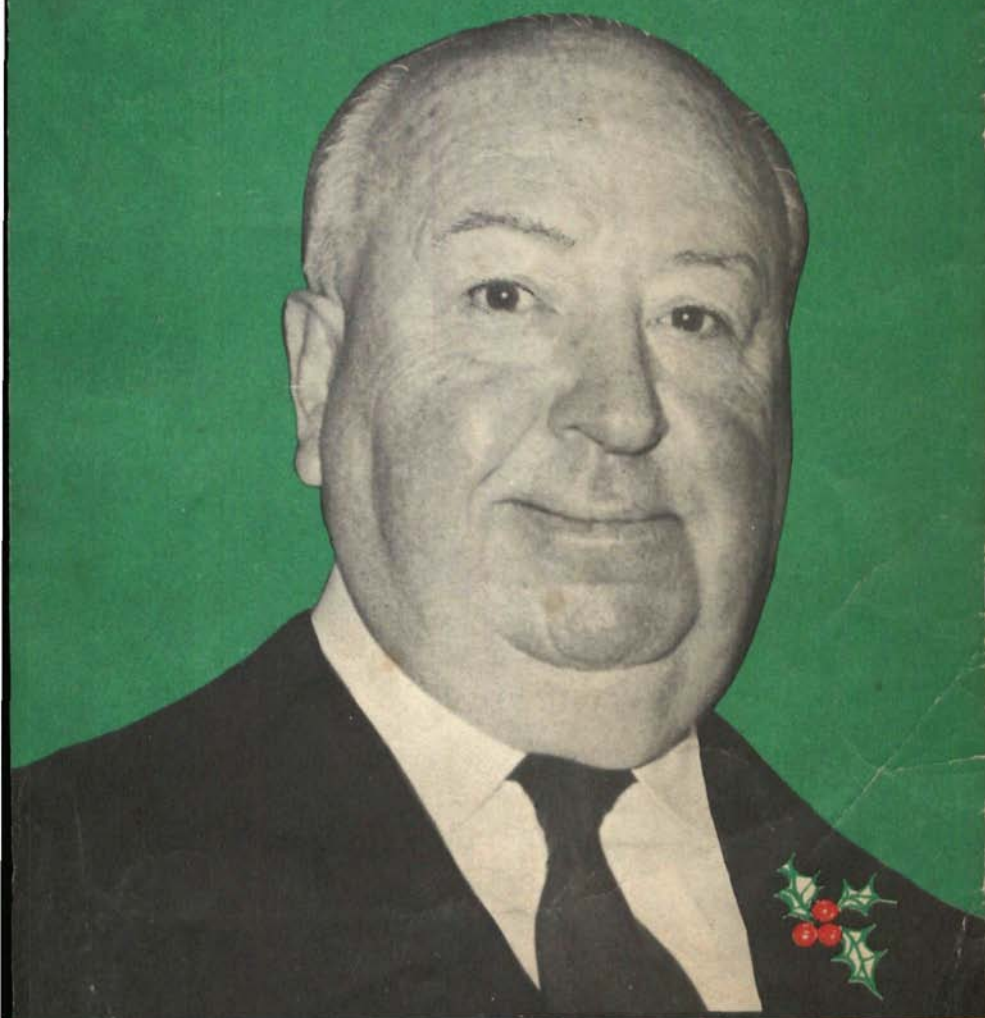
ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



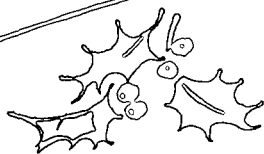
NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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Christmas
and Happy
New Year

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Seldom does a person's attainment gain full purport until it no longer matters.



THE FIRST THING Cain did when he arrived in San Francisco was to steal a car.

He stepped off the through Portland bus at the Seventh Street Terminal, carrying a blue airline overnight bag; it was a few minutes after midnight. He walked through the terminal, without haste, turning south to Mission Street and then east along there to a shadowed, unattended parking

lot. He prowled among the scattered few cars still parked there until he found a dark blue, late model sedan which satisfied him. From the pocket of his tan overcoat he took a thin piece of stiff, oddly-shaped wire and bent to the door lock. Finally, he slipped in beneath the wheel, placing the overnight bag on the seat beside him. He probed the ignition slot with the wire, and after a few seconds the sedan's engine began rumbling softly. The entire operation had taken perhaps two minutes; if anyone had been watching, it would simply have looked like he was entering his own car with his own set of keys.

Cain put the sedan in gear, switched on the headlights and drove out of the lot, crossing the double yellow lines illegally to turn west on Mission. Some twenty minutes later, he left the freeway, drove through the dark, quiet, deserted streets and entered the prosperous, well-landscaped community of Hillsborough. On Devaney Way, Cain made a left turn and went three blocks. In the middle

of the fourth, he eased the sedan to the curb in front of a sprawling, two-story red brick home with ornate grillwork balconies. On the left side of the house, just ahead of where Cain had parked, was a crushed, white gravel drive, bordered on both sides by a six-foot hedge. He could not see the front door of the home because the hedge extended down to parallel the street in front, broken only by a grillwork gate to the rear of where he was parked, but he could see the open, empty garage clearly. A pale, hooded light burned over the door.

Cain turned off the headlights but left the engine running. It was an extremely quiet engine, and he was sure no one in the red brick house, or in any of the adjacent

the seat until his eyes were on a level with the sill of the open window.

At twenty-seven minutes past one, headlights appeared on Devaney Way; coming toward him. Cain drifted lower on the seat. A red directional signal, indicating a left turn, came on below the headlights as the car, a cream-colored sedan, approached. Cain nodded once in the darkness, his fingers tightening around the butt of the automatic on his thigh.

The sedan turned smoothly onto the gravel drive, red stoplights winking. Cain watched as the driver, the lone occupant, maneuvered the car into the open garage. Cain, ears straining, heard the faint slam of a car door.

He raised up on the seat, plac-

by Bill Proszynski

or facing houses, could hear it. He set the parking brake and slid across the seat to the passenger side. He wound down the window there, then lifted the blue overnight bag onto his lap, zippered it open, and took the large caliber automatic from inside.

He held the automatic on his right thigh and looked at the luminescent dial of his wristwatch: one-ten. Cain slid down in

ing his arm on the windowsill, the gun extended toward the garage. A shadowed figure emerged from inside, stopped, and there was a faint whirring sound as the automatic garage door began to slide down slowly. Then the man turned and Cain could see him clearly in the pale light from above the door.

He squeezed the trigger on the automatic three times, rapidly,

sighting along the barrel; the explosions shattered the nocturnal quiet with reverberating sound. Each of the three shots went exactly where Cain had intended them to go—into the garage wall above and slightly to the left of the man there.

The man threw himself to the drive, rolling swiftly toward the hedge on his right. Cain dropped the automatic into the overnight bag, slid over under the wheel. The rear tires on his car screamed violently against the pavement as Cain's foot bore down on the accelerator. He had time for one quick glance in the direction of the garage where the man lay partially hidden in the shadow of the hedge, head raised slightly, looking toward him. Then Cain's car was moving away, gathering speed. In his rear-view mirror, Cain could see lights being flicked on in neighboring houses. He took the first corner, left, and when he had cleared the intersection he switched on his headlights. Two more blocks and a right turn, and Cain reduced his speed to the legal limit of twenty-five.

Just short of a half-hour later, he reentered the San Francisco limits. He exited the freeway and parked in front of a warehouse driveway. He got out then, taking the overnight bag, and walked

quickly up three blocks to Mission Street. There he caught a bus downtown, entered the Graceling Hotel, registered under the name of Philip Storm, and was given a room on the third floor. Inside the room, he removed the gun from the bag, oiled and cleaned it, and reloaded the clip from a box of shells. Then he replaced the automatic in the bag, put it under the bed, and lay down on top of the sheets.

It was almost dawn before he finally slept.

The man who had been shot at in Hillsborough was named James Agenrood.

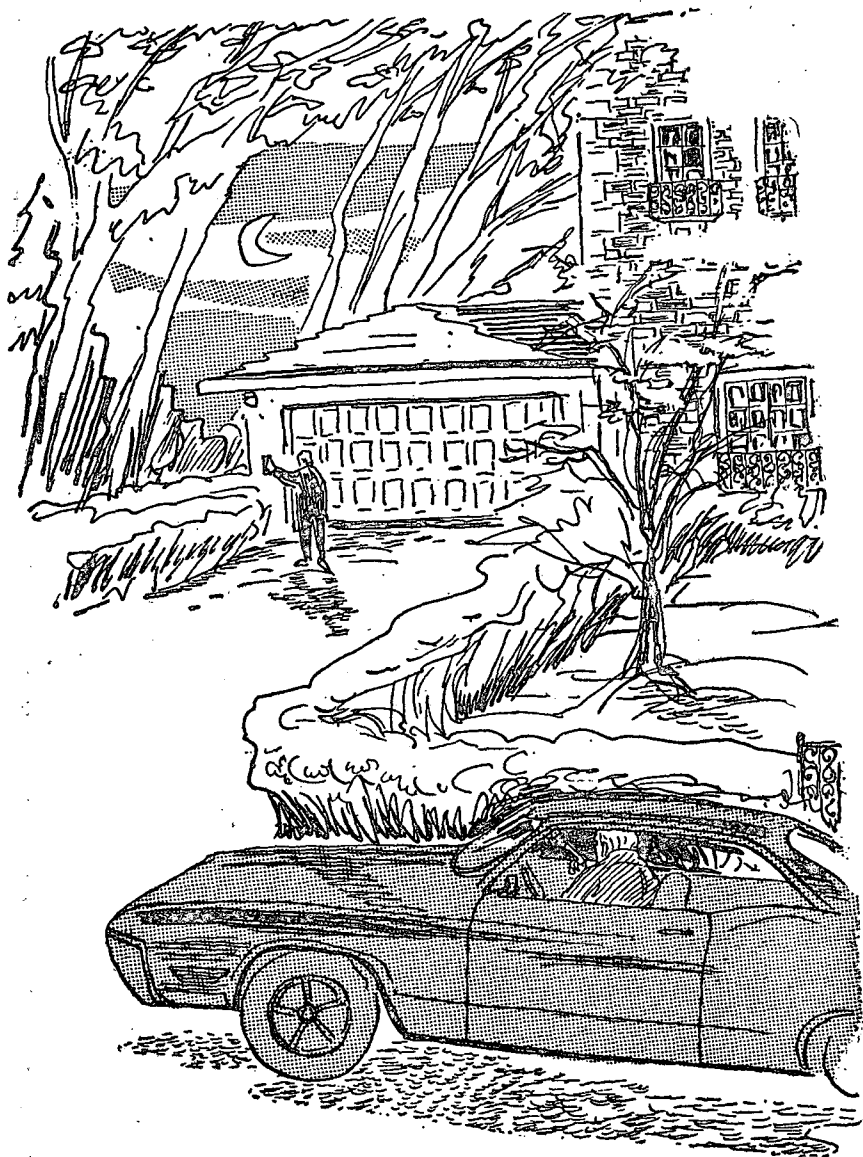
Following the shooting, he sat in his paneled, book-lined study, alone. His wife, who had been badly frightened, had taken several sleeping pills and finally gone to bed.

Agenrood poured brandy from a crystal decanter into a snifter and tasted it without his usual enjoyment. He had regained his composure, but his nerves were still greatly agitated.

He tasted the brandy again, then slid the telephone toward him across the desk and dialed a number. It rang several times; finally, a sleepy voice said, "Hello?"

"Len? This is Jim."

"This is a hell of a time of night to be calling anybody, Jim," the



CAIN'S MARK

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sleepy voice complained irritably.

Agenrood took a measured breath. "Somebody tried to kill me tonight," he said slowly.

"What!"

"Yes. About an hour ago."

There was silence for a moment, and then the voice, which was no longer sleepy, said, "Do you have any idea who it was?"

"No."

"Professional?"

"I'd say so. He seemed to know my habits, that I always go to the club on Wednesday nights, and that I usually get home around one-thirty. He was waiting out on the street."

"Just one man?"

"I think so."

"Did you get a look at him?"

"It was too dark."

"How about the car?"

"Dark sedan, maybe last year's," Agenrood said. "I saw part of the license plate. DRD."

"Did you call the police?"

"No, of course not."

"I'll get somebody on it right away."

"I'd appreciate it, Len."

"Listen, Jim, whoever it was isn't affiliated with us. You know your standing with the national office."

"I didn't think he was."

"Just so you know."

"Thanks, Len."

"I'll drop by your office tomorrow.

We can talk about it then."

"All right."

"And Jim . . . be careful, will you?"

Agenrood laughed, but there was no trace of humor in his gray eyes. "I'll do that, don't worry."

He cradled the receiver, poured another drink, his fifth since the shooting, and sat staring into the snifter. His face, in the pale light from his desk lamp, was an inscrutable mask etched of solid stone.

The next morning Cain awoke at eleven, dressed leisurely, then called room service and ordered a pot of coffee and some buttered toast. When it arrived, he carried it to the small writing desk. In one of its drawers he found note paper, plain white envelopes and pencils.

He printed a short missive, folded it carefully, slipped it into an envelope and addressed it, then put on his overcoat and went out to the elevator.

In a drugstore two blocks from the Graceling Hotel, Cain bought a six-cent stamp. There was a mailbox on the opposite corner, and he dropped the envelope in there after noting on the front the times when mail was picked up.

Before returning to the hotel, Cain bought a newspaper. In his room, he read it carefully. There was no mention of the episode in Hillsborough. Cain had not ex-

pected there would be; for one thing, it had happened well past midnight, too late for the morning editions; for another, and more importantly, he knew that Agenrood would not have called in the police. He read the paper thoroughly just the same.

He lay on his bed, thinking, for the remainder of the afternoon. At five o'clock, he went out to a nearby restaurant and ate a light supper. On the way back from there, he stopped at a telephone booth, inserted a dime and dialed a number from memory. A man's voice answered.

"Hello?"

Cain did not say anything.

"Hello?" the voice repeated.

Cain held the receiver away from his ear.

"Hello? Hello? Who is this?"

Cain hung up and left the booth.

The distinguished-looking man who sat in James Agenrood's private office at Consolidated Trades, Incorporated, tamped the dottle from his briar pipe and said, "Let's have a look at this note, Jim."

Wordlessly, Agenrood passed a folded sheet of paper across his desk. Len picked it up, unfolded it, and read:

Agenrood:

What happened Wednesday night can happen again, if there is a need

for it. And if there is, you can be very sure a garage wall will not be my primary target.

Stay by your phone this weekend.

Len folded the paper again and laid it carefully on Agenrood's desk. "No signature," he said.

"Did you expect there to be one?"

"Easy, Jim."

"I'm all right."

Len refilled his pipe. "What do you think he means?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? He wasn't trying to kill me the other night at all. He's not a professional assassin."

"Unless he's free-lancing."

"That's possible, I suppose," Agenrood said. "In any case, he knows a lot about me. I don't know how, but he's got my private telephone number at home."

"He called you?"

"Yes, last night."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. I could hear him breathing on the other end of the line, and then he hung up."

"How do you know it was he?"

"It was," Agenrood said.

"You haven't talked to the police, have you?"

"I'm not a fool, Len."

"I didn't mean to imply that," Len said. "I've put Reilly and Pordenza on it. They're good men."

They learned that a dark blue sedan was abandoned in the Mission District sometime Wednesday night. It had been stolen earlier in the evening from a downtown parking lot. First three letters on the plate were DRD. It looks like that was the one he used."

"That bases him in San Francisco," Agenrood said. "The envelope this note came in was postmarked there. Did Reilly and Porzenza learn anything else?"

"No."

"Well, whoever he is, he's got to be known to the national office," Agenrood said. "Only somebody within the circle could find out as much about me as he seems to know."

Len rubbed his nose with an index finger. "Can you think of anybody who has a grudge against you? Anybody you pushed, no matter how lightly, at one time or another?"

"None that would try anything like this."

"Give me their names anyway."

Agenrood wrote several names and gave Len the list. He glanced at it briefly and tucked it into his suit pocket. "Are you staying home this weekend?"

"What else can I do?"

"I can put a couple of men on your house in case he tries something."

"No, Len," Agenrood said. "I don't think he'll do anything until after he talks to me. I'll be all right."

"If he calls, you let me know right away."

"I will."

"Try not to worry, will you? We'll find him before long."

The two men went to the door, and when Len had gone, Agenrood closed the door, stood looking at it for a long moment, then said, "I hope so. I sincerely hope so."

On Saturday night, shortly past eight, Cain left the Graceling Hotel for the first time since Thursday evening. There was an icy wind off the Bay, blowing ethereal wisps of fog overhead, so he walked quickly. He entered a quiet, dark cocktail lounge, ordered a draft beer from the barman and then carried it into the rear of the lounge to a telephone booth. Inside the booth, Cain set the glass on the little shelf beneath the phone and dialed the same memorized number that he had on Thursday night.

Presently there was a soft click and a man's voice said guardedly, "Yes?"

"Agenrood?"

A brief pause. "Yes?"

"Did you receive my note?"

Another pause, longer this time. Then, "I received it."

"Did you understand it?"

"I think I did," he answered.
"Good," Cain said. "I thought you would."

"Just who are you?"

"You don't really expect me to tell you that, do you?"

"All right, then. How much do you want?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars."

Cain heard Agenrood suck in his breath sharply.

"Did you hear me, Agenrood?"

"I heard you, but I don't keep that kind of money."

"You can get it readily enough."

"Suppose I don't agree?"

"What do *you* think?"

"You're making a very large mistake," Agenrood said. "I represent the—"

"I know who you represent."

"Then you're a fool."

"Two hundred thousand dollars," Cain said.

"If I pay it, you won't live to spend it."

"If you don't," Cain said, "you won't *live*. Period."

There was a long silence.

"Well, Agenrood?"

"I'll have to think it over."

Cain smiled. "You do that."

"How can I get in touch with you?"

Cain continued to smile. "Stay by your phone, Agenrood," he said, and replaced the receiver gently.

James Agenrood paced the carpet in his study nervously. He said, "He called about eight tonight, Len."

Len stood holding a snifter of brandy by Agenrood's desk. His features were grim. "And?"

"He wants two hundred thousand dollars."

Len said, "He can't be serious."

"He's deadly serious. It was plain in his voice."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Agenrood said. "That's why I asked you to come by."

Len rolled the brandy snifter between his hands. "If you pay him," he said slowly, "it won't be the last time. If he knows you're worried, worried enough to come up with the money once, he'll be back. Again and again."

"Yes. I was thinking the same thing."

"I'd like to say Reilly and Porzenza have something further," Len said, "or that somebody on that list you gave me checks out as possible."

"But there's nothing, is there?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then I've got to pay him," Agenrood said. "Either that, or—" He left it there, moistening his lips.

Len walked across to a large picture window and stood with his back to Agenrood. After a time he

said, "That would be very dangerous, Jim."

"I know."

"You're established now, both here and with the national office. And you're important to us, Jim. Very important. I think you realize what I mean. If something went wrong..."

"I know that, too," Agenrood said.

Len turned and met Agenrood's eyes. "I don't advise that alternative," he said quietly.

"Do you think I like the idea of it any better? But it doesn't look like I have much choice, does it? Will you help me, Len?"

"I don't know."

"I've never asked you for a favor before."

"No, you haven't."

"I want two men, that's all."

Len worried his lower lip. "How do you know he'll leave himself open? He's done the rest of it very shrewdly."

"If he doesn't, I can arrange it."

"Are you sure?"

"No," Agenrood said. "I'm not sure."

"When is he supposed to contact you again?"

"He didn't say. I don't think it will be too long, though," Agenrood replied.

Finally Len said, "All right, Jim. If you can arrange a quiet place,

out of the way. *If* you can do that."

The telephone booth smelled strongly of after-shave lotion. Cain did not like the smell, but he kept the door shut tightly nonetheless. He said into the receiver, "What's your decision, Agenrood?"

"All right," Agenrood said. "I have no alternative, do I?"

"You're a wise man," Cain told him. "When can you have the money?"

"By Tuesday. How do you want to pick it up?"

"You bring it to me. Personally."

"There's no need for that."

"There's a need for it," Cain said shortly.

There was a long silence, then Agenrood said, "Whatever you say."

"If you don't come yourself, I'll know it."

"I'll come myself."

Cain nodded in the booth.

Agenrood asked, "Where do I go?"

"Are you familiar with the Coast Highway, just south of Rockaway Beach?"

"Yes."

"There's a gas station on the highway that has gone out of business," Cain said. "Loy Brophy's is the name of it. Park in there, by the pumps, at midnight Tuesday. When you see headlights swing in

off the highway, and they blink off and then back on again, follow the car. Have you got all that, Agenrood?"

"Yes. Is that all?"

"Just one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Make sure you're alone."

Cain left the booth and a block away he hailed a taxicab and told the driver where he wanted to go. The driver looked at him curiously for a moment, then shrugged expansively and edged out into the light Sunday afternoon traffic. Cain settled back against the rear seat, lit a cigarette, and thought out carefully what he was going to say when he arrived at his destination.

In the red brick house, James Agenrood said, "That's all of it, Len. Just as he told it to me on the telephone."

Len shifted in his chair, took the briar pipe from his suit pocket and looked at it for a moment. "It sounds like he's covering himself from all angles."

"Not quite."

"No," Len agreed. "Not quite."

"He won't be able to see inside my car unless he pulls right up next to me at the pumps. And even if he does that, it will be dark enough in the back seat to hide anybody down on the floorboards. He'd have to get out and walk right up to the car, and he's not going to do

that, not there on the highway. He's got some other place in mind."

"Suppose that other place is one that's well lighted, with a lot of people around?"

"I don't think so, Len," Agenrood said. "If that were his idea, he wouldn't have set it up for Rockaway Beach; that's a pretty dark and sparsely populated area. And he wouldn't go through all that business about blinking his headlights off and on, and then leaving, with me following him."

Len nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right."

"I think I am."

"Why do you suppose he wants you to bring the money personally? You'll see his face that way."

"I don't know," Agenrood admitted. "He has to be a little crazy to try something like this in the first place, and there's no way of telling what could be going through his mind. Maybe it's just a precaution against a trap and he's covering himself the way you said."

"Maybe," Len said. "And maybe he intends, once he has the money, to finish what he started Wednesday night."

"Yes," Agenrood said, taking a breath. "But it doesn't really matter, does it? If that's what he plans to do, he won't have the chance."

"I don't like it. It's damned risky."

"No riskier than turning him down, and then having to look over my shoulder every time I go out for a package of cigarettes until you locate him. *If you locate him.*"

Len filled his pipe. When he had it lighted, he said, "Reilly and Pordenza?"

"I know Pordenza. He's very capable."

"So is Reilly."

"All right, then."

Len studied the glowing bowl of his pipe. "He told you he'd know if you didn't come yourself?"

"That's what he said."

"He might plan on watching your house, then."

"I thought of that."

"But we can't do anything there. How do we get Reilly and Pordenza into your car?"

"They can come across the rear of my property and slip in through the back entrance to the garage. I'll have the garage door closed, and if he's out on the street somewhere he won't be able to see inside. They can get in and out of sight before I come out."

"That sounds okay."

"I guess that's it, then."

"Yes, that's it. But listen, Jim, I don't want to lose you, and neither does the national office. Go easy Tuesday night."

"I plan on doing just that," Agenrood said. "Everything is going to

turn out just fine. No problems."

"I hope so. Because if there's any trouble, I can't help you, Jim. As much as the national office likes you, they won't go to bat for you if there's a foul-up."

"I'm aware of that."

"Good luck, then."

Agenrood smiled faintly. "And good hunting?"

"Yes," Len said tonelessly, expressionlessly. "And good hunting."

On Tuesday night, Cain left the Graceling Hotel and walked to a car rental agency. It was five minutes till ten when Cain emerged, driving a new light brown, two-door hardtop.

The luminescent dial of Cain's wristwatch read ten-forty when he parked the hardtop less than half a block beyond James Agenrood's home in Hillsborough. He eased his body down on the seat, remaining beneath the wheel, then adjusted the rear-view mirror until he could see clearly Agenrood's garage and the pale light that burned above its electronic door. He was not worried about being seen there, or of anything happening to him so near Agenrood's home, but he kept his right hand on the automatic in the pocket of his overcoat.

Agenrood came out at eleven-thirteen; Cain saw his face clearly in the garage light. He was alone.

He disappeared into the garage, and moments later the cream-colored sedan began to glide backward to the street. Headlights washed over the hardtop, but Cain was low enough on the seat so that he was sure Agenrood could not see him. The sedan swept past, and through the windshield now he watched it turn the corner at the first intersection and vanish from sight.

Cain remained where he was for five minutes, timing it by his watch. Then he straightened on the seat, started the hardtop and drove off in the direction Agenrood had taken.

Cain turned onto the Coast Highway at twenty minutes before twelve. The Pacific Ocean lay smooth and hushed and cold on his right, like a great limitless pool of quicksilver in the shine from the three-quarter moon overhead.

Cain began to slow down when he saw the shadowed shape of the closed gas station ahead of him. He came parallel to it, then made a left-hand turn across the highway and swung up onto the square of asphalt in front of the station. The cream-colored car sat dark and silent by the forward pumps. Cain touched the headlight switch, shutting the beams off; immediately, he flicked them back on again. He drove across to the opposite side of the asphalt square, waited there to allow a large truck to pass, then

swung out onto the Coast Highway again, resuming a southerly direction. In his rear-view mirror he saw Agenrood come out of the station and fall in behind him.

Inside the cream-colored car one of the two men hunched down on the floor of the back seat—Pordenza—asked, "Where do you think he's heading?"

James Agenrood's hands were slick on the steering wheel. "I don't know," he answered.

"Well, I hope he gets there damned quick," Pordenza said. "I've got a charley horse in my leg."

"Just stay out of sight."

"Don't worry, Mr. Agenrood."

"We know what we're doing," Reilly put in quietly.

Agenrood watched the crimson lights two hundred yards ahead of him. A fine sheen of perspiration beaded his wide forehead. They continued for another mile, and then the left directional signal on the hardtop winked on; the car began to reduce its speed.

Agenrood said, "He's going to turn."

"Where?" Pordenza asked.

"There's a narrow dirt road up ahead. It winds up into the hills, to some private homes scattered across the tops."

"Anything between the highway and those homes?"

"No."

"That's it," Reilly said alertly.

The hardtop turned onto the dirt road. Agenrood followed. They began to climb steadily; the road twisted an irregular path, with several doglegs and a sharp curve now and then. High wisps of fog began to shred in Agenrood's headlights, and he could see that at the crests of the hills, where the houses were, it was thick and blanketing.

The hardtop came around one of the doglegs and its stoplights went on, flashing blood-red in the gray-black night. Agenrood said, "There's a turnout up ahead. I think he's going in there."

The hardtop edged into the turnout, parallel to the upper end where a slope was grown thickly with bushes and scrub cypress. "He's stopping," Agenrood said.

"Pull up behind him," Pordenza directed from the floor of the back seat. "Leave a car's length between you."

Agenrood complied. When he saw the headlights on the hardtop go out, he shut his own off. It was dark then, but the moonlight—though dimmed now and then by the tendrils of fog—bathed the turnout with sufficient light to see.

"What's he doing?" Pordenza asked.

"Just sitting there."

"When he gets out of the car, let him get clear of it by a few steps.

Not too many. Then let us know."

Agenrood could hear faint stirrings in the back seat. He knew Reilly and Pordenza had moved, one to each of the rear doors. They were waiting there now, with one hand on the door handles and the other wrapped around their guns.

"When we go," Reilly breathed from the back seat, "you get down on the front seat. Just in case."

"All right," Agenrood said, and the sweat on him was oily and cold now, flowing wetly along his body.

Cain sat very still beneath the wheel of the hardtop, his eyes lifted to the rear-view mirror. There was no movement from inside the other car; at least, none that he could see.

With his right hand, he took the automatic from the pocket of his overcoat and held it tightly in his fingers. He put his left hand on the door latch, took a long, deep breath and released it, then opened the door and stepped out onto the dusty surface of the turnout. He held the automatic low and slightly behind him, so that it was hidden from Agenrood's view by his leg.

Cain's muscles tensed, grew rigid. His eyes, unblinking, never left the sedan. He took one step away from his car, another, a third step toward Agenrood's.

Three things happened simultaneously: there was a hoarse, muffled cry from inside the sedan; Ag-

enrood's body disappeared, falling sideways; the rear doors of the sedan flew open and two men came out, very fast, guns extended in their hands.

Cain threw himself to the ground, rolled, once, twice, came up on his knees, bracing himself. Twin flashes of orange light came from either side of Agenrood's car; the two explosions were so close together the sound of them became one. Dust splashed up to one side of Cain; at the same instant he felt a jarring impact high on the left side of his chest, a quick cut of pain, and then the area went numb, but he did not lose his balance, and his eyes were clear. The automatic bucked twice, loudly, in his hand. He saw the man on the driver's side of the sedan whirl and fall, crying out.

The second man ducked behind the fender on the passenger side. Cain tried to turn his body there and couldn't; his entire left side was without feeling now. The man on the passenger side rose up cautiously, extending his gun, aiming, and then three rapid shots sounded from the scrub cypress on the slope. The second man stood up briefly, pirouetted, and vanished from sight.

The automatic dropped from Cain's fingers and he let his body sag forward until he lay huddled in the cold dust. He heard the whir-

ring whine of the sedan's starter, and then there were several shouts and the sound of running feet. A door was wrenched open and the sedan became silent again.

Cain tried to smile, but he was unable to move his facial muscles. He closed his eyes. A single pair of running feet approached him, and he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard somebody speaking to him. He could not understand the words.

Blackness began to unfold behind his eyes, and then there were no more sounds at all.

The private hospital room in Pacifica had greenish walls and smelled of ether and antiseptic and, faintly, of the day nurse's perfume. Cain sat propped up by several pillows on the single bed; his chest was bare, and the upper half of it was swathed in bandages.

There were two other men in the room. One was tall and had a long, thin neck that resembled nothing so much as a giraffe's; the other was short and studious-appearing, and wore a very large pair of horn-rimmed glasses. They sat on two white metal chairs at the foot of the bed.

The studious-appearing man said, "You're a damned fool, Cain. You know that, don't you?"

"Am I?" Cain said briefly. He

was looking out of the window; it was a warm, clear day and he could see the Pacific Ocean, glass-smooth in the distance.

The studious man opened a leather briefcase on his lap and removed a single sheet of paper; it was filled with neat lines of typing, single-spaced. The man looked at Cain, and then looked back at the paper. "Do you know what this is?"

"No," Cain said.

"It's a report on one Steven Cain," the studious man told him. "A very comprehensive report we had compiled."

Cain continued to look out of the window.

"It says you were a colonel in the marines during the Second World War, twice decorated for valor on Leyte and Okinawa. It says that you graduated at the top of your class at the University of California, where you majored in Law Enforcement following the war, and that you joined the San Francisco Police Force in 1949 and once captured single-handedly four men in the act of robbing a factory payroll. It says that you were the youngest man in San Francisco police history to be promoted to the Detective Squad." The studious man paused, looking up at Cain again. "There's more, a lot more. It's a very impressive record you've got, Cain."

Cain did not answer.

"Impressive enough to indicate a very acute intelligence," the studious man said, "but I don't see any sign of intelligence in this crazy stunt you pulled off here. I don't see anything at all of the man this report covers."

Again, Cain did not answer.

"It was because of your daughter, wasn't it, Cain?" the man with the long neck said suddenly, speaking for the first time. "Because of what happened to Doreen?"

Cain brought his eyes away from the window and let them rest on the man with the long neck. He kept his lips pressed tightly together.

"It's all there in the report," the man with the long neck told him. "About how you raised the girl after your wife died twelve years ago, about how you were devoted to her. And it's in there, too, about how she was run down and killed by a car on an afternoon eight months ago when she was coming home from high school; how a patrol car nearby saw the hit-and-run and chased the car and caught it a few blocks away; how the driver pulled a gun when they approached and one of the officers was forced to shoot him in self-defense, killing him instantly; how that driver upon later identification was found to be a twenty-three year old drug addict and a convicted felon; and

how they found almost half a kilo of heroin under the dashboard of the car and maybe the other half in the kid . . .”

“That’s enough!” Cain was leaning forward on the bed, oblivious to the sharp pain that the sudden movement had caused in his chest; his jaw was set grimly and his eyes were flashing.

The man with the long neck seemed not to hear him. “For all intents and purposes, you went just a little crazy when you heard the news, Cain. You needed somebody to strike out at, somebody to blame for your daughter’s death. The kid was dead, so it had to be somebody else. That somebody else was James Agenrood. You let all your hate build for him, for the man you were sure was the Organization’s San Francisco-area head of narcotics distribution.

“You began a one-man crusade to get Agenrood; at first, you went through official channels and the newspapers agreed to play down the investigation—which was why Agenrood never knew your name. You dug up or bought or intimidated every scrap of knowledge available on Agenrood, but at the end of it all, you hadn’t uncovered a thing on him that could put him away. He was, officially, a respectable citizen, President of Consolidated Trades, Inc., and untouch-

able. You just couldn’t let go of it, though. Getting Agenrood became an obsession; you neglected your official duties in the pursuit of it. The commissioner had to call you in finally and order you to cease. You refused, and he had no alternative but to suspend you indefinitely. A week later you resigned. Shortly after that, you moved to Portland to live with a married sister and everybody here was both sorry and maybe a little glad to see you go because they thought that, finally, you were through with it.

“But you weren’t through, were you, Cain? You had to get Agenrood, one way or another. You couldn’t commit murder; you’d been an honest, dedicated cop too long to resort to that. So you went up to Portland and thought it all out, looking for another way, and then you came up with your idea. You came back here last Wednesday and stole a car to make the fake attempt on Agenrood’s life look professional. You knew that he would never pay the kind of money you asked him for; you knew there was only one other thing he could do. Hit you in the head, as they say. You made sure he would be there when it was tried, and then you contacted us. You were well aware that the government was as eager to get something on Agenrood as you were, and you told us just

enough to get us interested—but not enough so that we knew what you were planning—so that we would agree to send a couple of men up to that road to wait. And it worked out okay, at least to your way of thinking. We've got Agenrood on a charge of conspiracy to commit murder, among other things; he's through with the Organization, because they won't take the chance of becoming involved by jumping to his defense. So you got him, Cain. You got your revenge, all right."

Cain slumped back against the pillows, but his jaw remained grim. He did not say anything.

"But was it worth it?" the man with the long neck went on finally. "Was it really worth it, Cain? Was it worth the prison sentence you're facing on a list of charges that range from car theft to carrying a concealed weapon? What the hell have you actually gained by all this? Why didn't you let us handle it? We'd have gotten Agenrood sooner or later. We always get them sooner or later." He stopped speaking then, and it became very quiet

in the room. Neither man stirred.

After a long time, Cain said, "Maybe you would have gotten him, and maybe you wouldn't. I couldn't take the chance, don't you see? Agenrood killed my daughter, just as sure as if he had put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger. I had to be the one; it was up to me. I had to get him for Doreen. Don't you understand that?"

The two men looked at Cain, and then at one another. The room was silent again for several minutes. Then the two men stood, wordlessly, and walked to the door. They turned there, and their eyes returned to the bed.

"Don't you?" Cain said to them, very softly.

"Yes," the studious man answered, just as softly. He put his hand on the knob and opened the door. "Yes, Cain, we understand."

Cain, lying in the bed, staring at the closed door after they had gone, wondered if they really understood at all; but after a while, when he had been alone for some time, he decided that it did not matter, one way or the other.



Ecstasy is to every man a matter of his own choosing—and of fortuitous circumstances.



JACK *by Bryce Walton*

PROFESSOR WELTY padded with quiet and eager tension about his murky laboratory. He was making last-minute preparations for what he considered a thoroughly justifiable act of tyrannicide: the killing of Dr. Brennan.

Professor Welty was wizened before his time. Thin, with a concave chest, bland eyes, wispy brown hair prematurely graying and thinning on a somewhat overly large head, he always wore rimless glasses and a shy, wistful little smile on the side of his prim mouth. Now he also wore a patched, much-laundered lab smock, rubber gloves, and felt

house slippers that cushioned his footsteps so he would not alarm his rats and guinea pigs in their wire cages.

He was bringing out one-gallon jars from the storage room and putting them on the floor by one of the large, bathtub-sized lab sinks near the west wall. The jars contained his own special formula

of intense corrosives mixed with sulphuric acid base. When he'd brought out fifteen jars and arranged them neatly, he checked the tear-gas cartridge in its fountain-pen ejector, placed the sledgehammer on the lab table near the sinks, angling it in a conveniently accessible position for quick use, then covered it with a soiled smock.

He looked at his wristwatch, hesitated, then hurried over to recheck the shutters on the windows to be sure they were tightly closed, although it was unlikely anyone would be stealing looks into the biology lab, especially tonight.

At this time, between Christmas and New Year's Day, Mayberry College was almost deserted by faculty and students. A few stragglers stayed on in lonely rooms; the caretaker, and of course, Welty. The wind made an icy whistling sound under the windowsill, and Welty shivered, gave a slight cough, and squinted out through a slit in the shutters.

Two feet of snow covered the quadrangle and the Christmas tree, on which the colored lights had gone out. Snow mounded and softened the shapes of old buildings, trees, brush, and eroded statuary. The whole antique pile of Mayberry might have been moribund and quietly sinking away under a shroud. Only three Georgian windows glowed a faint yellow, and two of those faded and went out as wind whipped dry clouds of snow through the air. The clock on the administration building seemed to have a weak, fading tone as it struck nine.

Of course there was no sign of anyone about. There was no sound either, except that faint hiss of wind under the sill, and an occasional lonely howl of a farm dog across the frozen hills and fields.

Professor Welty shivered again; not from the cold or the bleak tableau, but from joyous excitement, the pure elation that kept

flushing through his body like warm waves over a beach of dry sand. The still, blanketing snow gave a comforting secrecy and coziness to the night. Welty thought of it as his night; his night of retribution and being free, being rid of Brennan. Why, he might even be able to start over again, make up for the lost, wasted, stolen years of his life. The winter solstice, point of culmination, he mused; the turning point . . .

He closed the shutters, crossed to the lab table and lit a Bunsen burner. When the flame was going nicely, reflecting on beakers, retorts, and microscopes, Welty switched off the electric lights. This left no light in the cavernous room but that of the Bunsen burner, and the glow from three tropical fish tanks in a far corner.

In reality, should anyone see the lab lit up tonight, during vacation, or any other time, there was no cause for worry. "Welty," he would say, with probably a patronizing smile. "Welty puttering again, always puttering with his bones, jars, test tubes, guinea pigs, rats, and microscopic smears."

Year after year, weekends and holidays, Welty had been seen working in the lab, sometimes all night, so there was nothing unusual in his working here tonight and every night during the holidays.

No, Welty just preferred not to see Brennan well lighted when it happened to him. The thought of Brennan *erased, wiped out*, was beautiful, but Welty saw the means as an unsavory necessity. He deplored violence and cruelty. The thought of pain was almost unbearable. He had worked out special vivisection techniques that reduced to a minimum the pain suffered by his rats and guinea pigs, but their squeals still often sent Welty back into the storage room. There, hidden from his students, he would experience a spasm of strangely dry and soundless sobbing.

Now Welty was happy. He hummed under his breath as he checked his watch again. He hummed an old school song and stood very still in the shadows, waiting for Brennan. The sudden decision to kill him was a great release for Welty, an exhilaration, and the week since then, of imagining, thinking, and planning, had been a happy time; his only genuinely happy time, perhaps, since his graduation *cum laude* from a highly respected university . . . the wine afterward . . . friends and teachers and eager solicitations of bright-eyed but serious girls, their enchanting voices assuring him that he would be an important name in the biological sci-

ences. He had often dreamed in those days of flying to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize. So many years ago . . .

The memory could still make Welty's eyes burn, but now it made him want to laugh in a kind of ecstasy at the thought of what he would do to Brennan. He stopped humming. He swallowed anxiously. Then he shook his head and smiled again. Brennan would be here all right. He would drop by on his way to Bear Lake for a week of skiing. "I think I'm onto something new—microbial metabolism," Welty had told him. Brennan couldn't resist that bait.

Welty tensed. Brennan's boots were stomping with hollow echoes through the Life Science Lecture Hall adjoining the lab. The double doors to the lab rattled open, and Brennan's bulk hesitated in the dim light like a big clot of shadow. Welty heard heavy concentrated breathing, and smelled whiskey.

"A devil of a time to call me over here, Welty. It'd better be good."

"It will be," Welty said.

"I'm off for a week of skiing, Welty, you know that."

"I know." Brennan always went up to Bear Lake skiing during the holidays. Knowing that fact was the most important base in Welty's

plan. "I know where you're going."

"Then I guess you also know that I only drive my wagon up as far as the junction and take the cable train the rest of the way up to the lodge."

"I know that."

"I don't want to miss that train tonight."

"You'll never miss it," Welty said. "You made it quite clear to me that I should keep you informed about any new discoveries or leads I might make. Well, I'm onto something, and I didn't want you to think I might be holding out on you."

"Quite right, Welty. You've turned out to be a sensible little fellow. But I can't give you more than five, ten minutes. Just give me some key notes to read over, a fast abstract of what you're onto, and I'll be off. Okay?" He took a heavy step toward Welty, his thick face and mustache and suede cap and the fur collar of his tweed coat dripping melting snow. "But don't leave any word lying about. No preliminary leaks to anyone, Welty, or—"

"Please," Welty interrupted. "The nature of our grimy partnership is all too clear to me." Taking his clenched fists from his smock pockets, unclenching them and clasping his hands together, he barely managed to clamp his

mouth shut against a giggle as he motioned Brennan over to the table and the Bunsen burner.

"Here," he said, a slight quiver in his tone as he indicated several sheets of paper by the flickering light and took out the gas-firing fountain pen.

"I can't read this here," Brennan protested. "Wha—"

As the tear gas seared the tissues of Brennan's eyes he gave several hoarse yelps that expressed as much disbelief as agony. He stumbled back and pawed his gloved hands at his eyes. He bent over, turning slowly this way and that, waving his hands, swaying his shoulders like a wounded animal.

Welty slid the sledgehammer from beneath his smock, swung it up and to the right over his head, balanced and swung it down and around as he took three slow, measured steps toward his target. He had practiced this many times, and his expert knowledge of anatomy guided the blow precisely where it would accomplish the desired effect—as quick and painless a death as possible.

It was controlled and to the point, no wasted motion or fumbling. Welty moved through it all the way in that oddly detached, uninvolved manner, like a very efficient robot, hardly seeing or feeling what he did, although he knew

when the sledge snapped Brennan's spine at the base of the brain. Later, he remembered only vaguely how Brennan suddenly collapsed in a lump, his forehead on the concrete, all of him instantly dead and limply acquiescent. Of course, as Welty had planned it, this made no blood and that was a great comfort as he got the body out of its clothes, and managed to haul and heave it up into the lab sink.

He quickly emptied the fifteen gallons of corrosives mixed with sulphuric acid into the sink. Acid fumes rose up and made him cough and cry until Brennan's body was completely immersed in the smoking, bubbling bath and Welty stumbled back against the table.

He leaned there, breathing hard, having trouble focusing his vision. He took off his glasses and cleaned them, and kept wiping the sweat from his face with a soiled smock. He put his glasses on again and peered up at the vapor rising and hanging along the ceiling.

He fought a draining weakness and aching nausea, and even felt a surprising threat of panic as he realized that he had done a fatal thing, something irreparable. The alarmed rats and guinea pigs set up a sad apathetic squealing, and the sound aroused the usual pity

in Welty. He hurried back to their cages and soothed them with low, whispered baby talk until they quieted down again.

After that he felt good again; happy. He became suddenly composed as before, deliberate and careful as he returned to his work. The threat of fear and panic never came back.

Welty put items that wouldn't burn, Brennan's ruby-and-gold ring, wristwatch, a pocketknife, change, keys, in a small plastic box, keeping only the keys to Brennan's station wagon. The rest of the clothes, except for Brennan's topcoat and suede cap, he wrapped in a neat bundle, took it down the back stairs to the basement and put it into the furnace flames. O'Brien, the caretaker—he no longer tolerated the title of janitor and his salary was three times Welty's—had just made his coal-stoking rounds. The furnace was flaming hotly, and O'Brien wouldn't be around again until early in the morning.

Welty put on Brennan's suede cap, topcoat, and a pair of leather gloves and slipped out the back entrance of the Life Sciences Building into the snow. He had not forgotten to hang his usual sign on the lab door: *Important Experiment. Please Do Not Disturb.*

He hurried through the whirling snow in the shadows of buildings



to the rear of the cottage near Innswood Hall where Brennan lived. Brennan's station wagon was waiting in the garage. The cottage was dark. The surrounding buildings were dark. If anyone did happen to see him in the curtaining snow he would have no reason to assume Welty was anyone else but Brennan. He made sure that Brennan's skiing paraphernalia and suitcases were in the station wagon, then he got in and drove very slowly and carefully through the lane of cypress trees down to the main road. There he turned right, taking the route Brennan would have taken to the junction, through the desolate, snow-smothered woods and fields.

This was the crucial stretch, Welty knew. This was the part in which the exigencies of chance could not be eliminated. Here a fatal accident could happen. If he had a wreck now, or car trouble, or anything of that sort, he had lost. Of course there had to be some risk, and this drive to the Skauton River Bridge seemed a very reasonable gamble. There was no traffic to speak of until the junction, and he wouldn't be going that far. The station wagon ran beautifully and had snow tires. The gas and oil gauges registered full. His anxiety faded as he drove along steadily, almost noiselessly through the pad-

ding snow. He felt good again, and began to hum softly to the rhythmic grind and grate of the windshield wipers.

Then he began to talk aloud to Brennan, as if Brennan were there beside him; or more as if Brennan were standing before him in a courtroom and he was a judge who had found Brennan guilty and sentenced him and was now reviewing or justifying his fatal judgment.

"You stole my life, Brennan. You robbed me of my lifetime's achievements as a scientist, of all that has ever given any meaning to my life, which was worse in a way than if you had literally killed me. So now I have killed you. Primitive justice, an eye for an eye; but justice all the same.

"Not that you were entirely responsible for my bad performance, Brennan. I contributed my own weaknesses and follies. My weakness for unworthy women . . . I had to pay for that. I even married two of them and they bled me white. So I was never able to get my doctorate. Instead, I had to take seedy jobs in miserable little institutions like Mayberry just so I could subsist and sign alimony checks.

"But I never gave up my research, never during all those years did I give up. I had the gift, Brennan, and you knew I had it. You en-

couraged me, helped me, even got some special lab equipment for me. I shared my theories and told you, step by step, what I was doing, and when I made the big breakthrough, you took everything from me. You published all my findings as your own. You took all of my notes, everything. Absolutely no evidence remained to me that I'd had anything to do with the discoveries you claimed for yourself. You had my notes, papers. You published the findings. You won the honors, including an appointment to the Laramy Foundation which you were prepared to take this year. But I couldn't bear that, Brennan. I really couldn't.

"I couldn't expose your crime and regain my rights. I had no proof of my work. The scientific academies wouldn't have listened to me anyway because of my never getting my doctorate. They would have laughed. Everyone would have laughed at the claims of putting Welty.

"Then, you blackmailed me. You threatened to expose my sordid and stupid affair with Jennifer Crane, a former student who bore my child and has also been blackmailing me to the tune of a monthly pay check. You threatened to do what Jennifer threatened to do—expose me to the board. I would have been kicked out of Mayberry,

and when you're kicked out of Mayberry, there's no other place to go. I couldn't have taught anywhere, would never have had access to a laboratory.

"How did you know about my affair with Jennifer? I finally got a hint out of her that she'd known you, Brennan, even better than she had known me, and a great deal more often . . .

"Anyway, I feel that your paying with your life is thoroughly just, or I wouldn't have arranged it . . ."

Where the road turned just before crossing Skauton River Bridge, Welty did not. He drove straight on off the road, down a steep slope through a stand of willows and stopped. He got out, and while the motor was still running he lowered the window and released the brake and the car ran out onto the thin river ice. The ice broke. The black river sucked the station wagon down until only a few inches of its top were visible.

Welty trudged seven miles into the icy wind back to Mayberry. His pace was slow and steady and he scarcely felt the tiredness in his legs, or the numbing cold. In fact he rather enjoyed the walk. It was the first time that Welty had enjoyed a long walk in many years.

The blowing snow covered his tracks behind him.

The *Do Not Disturb* sign still

hung on the lab door that was still locked, and Welty knew that no one would have imagined he'd been away. He threw Brennan's topcoat and suede cap into the furnace, and knew they would be consumed before O'Brien made his early morning rounds.

The ring, watch, knife, and keys he dropped into a hundred-foot well that had been boarded over and unused for a hundred years. He cleaned the head of O'Brien's sledgehammer and replaced it in the caretaker's toolhouse.

At three-thirty in the morning, Welty fixed himself a hot toddy, then set the alarm and went to sleep on a cot he kept in the storage room. He often did that during experiments rather than walk back to his furnished room. When the alarm sounded four hours later Welty got up promptly and resumed his work.

While Brennan's flesh dissolved in the sink, Welty brought Grinning Jack into the lab from the Life Science Lecture Hall. There he dismantled it. Grinning Jack was a complete skeleton, or osteology, that had been standing on a bronze base in the lecture hall to the left of the podium for as long as anyone around Mayberry could remember. Any records concerning who it might have been, or how it had gotten to Mayberry were long lost.

Welty delicately unfastened tiny wires and copper hinges that held the bones together, then scattered them about in a balanced way through the various other bones he kept labeled under glass.

When Brennan's bones were clean, Welty dried them in an oven, dismantled them and spread them neatly on a cloth, where he treated them many hours with a sunlamp. The ultraviolet gave the bones just the proper patina, an appearance of venerable and yellowish age.

Welty then polished the bones until only an expert, after careful scrutiny and testing, could have distinguished them from the bones of Grinning Jack, and no one would ever have cause to do that. From now on, for everyone but Welty, Brennan's bones would be Grinning Jack.

Welty worked over the remains of Brennan with small electric drills and screwdrivers, reassembling the osteology by using the original hinges. He then carried the finished work back into the lecture hall and mounted it exactly as Grinning Jack had been mounted—same stance, same slight inclination of the head, and the same lugubrious grin. After that, he scoured the sink until no microscopic traces were left of the thick, yellowish, greasy liquid that had gone down the drain.

It was three weeks later before Brennan's car was discovered in the Skauton River. Sheriff Donlevy of Mayberryville said he thought the car must have gone out of control trying to make the turn onto the bridge, and had plunged into and through the thin ice of the river. Brennan had apparently managed to get through the open window, but had drowned under the ice. They had no immediate luck finding the body, said Sheriff Donlevy, but they would keep trying and were sure to find it when the ice broke up and they could conduct a proper search.

Welty returned happily to his classes. He enjoyed lecturing when he always had the company of the fixed, frozen, voiceless, defeated, impotent, always watching and listening image of Grinning Jack Brennan.

There it was, Welty reflected, there in the open and so obvious that even if some suspicion grew concerning Brennan's departure, there was no chance of suspicion falling on this ancient and nameless osteology.

Welty's happiest two months passed quickly. He took more interest in his classes again, and his lectures grew spirited and even, at times, entertaining. Rumor began about Welty's possible appointment to department head at Mayberry.

Then it was April. The window in the Science Lecture Hall was open and a warm breeze sighed in through the bones of Grinning Jack Brennan and stirred the wisps of fading hair on Welty's head. The last student in his fourth session class had just left the hall, and Welty gave his customary nod and shy smile to Grinning Jack, picked up his briefcase and started to step down from behind his podium.

He stopped. Someone had come in and was standing down there in the center aisle; just standing there with his hat hanging down at the end of his right arm, twisting round and round nervously, and Welty felt a brief inner disturbance he shrank from defining.

"Yes?" Welty said hesitantly, and when the man took a sort of slow, reluctant step forward there was something familiar about him.

Young, with almost boyishly good features and brushcut yellow hair, he wore a tie and a dark suit which didn't seem to fit very well, and carried a black trench coat over his left arm. Looking up at Welty with a sad, apologetic frown, he said, "Maybe you remember me, Professor Welty."

"Oh, yes, yes, now I do!" Welty smiled genuinely and hurried down into the aisle and held out his hand. "Tom Coulter, isn't it? My very best biology major. It

was the class of sixty-six, right?"

"Right, Professor."

"Tom Coulter," Welty beamed. "The lad I voted most likely to make a name for himself."

Coulter swallowed with visible effort, nodded, put his hat on a chair arm, shook hands very quickly, and picked his hat up again. Welty noticed that his upper lip was perspiring, and that his eyes shifted uncomfortably. "Ah—well, sir, you were always my favorite teacher."

Emotion flooded up suddenly into Welty's eyes. Pleased and surprised, he said, "Really—why, I never thought—"

"Oh yes, Professor Welty. You always seemed to have a wonderful knowledge and love for your subject. That intensity got through to students. It did to me, anyway. You're the one teacher I ever really got anything from."

Welty blinked his eyes rapidly and half turned away from Coulter toward the open window. His throat felt tight. He took his glasses off and cleaned them and put them on again. "That—that's very kind of you to say, very kind. Well, where have you been since sixty-six? What have you done with yourself?"

"As you know, I was always interested in forensic medicine," Coulter said. He, too, turned and

looked at the window. "I went on to State University and specialized in forensics. I ended up in the county coroner's office. I've been assistant coroner for a while."

"I—I see."

"Sheriff Donlevy came over to see us. He's been worried about what happened to the body of Dr. Brennan. No trace of it has been found. The river's been thoroughly dredged. It makes no logical sense, of course, that no trace of his clothes or his body should be found. Something always is found, you know, after this long."

"Always?"

"Well, often enough that when there isn't, an investigator like Sheriff Donlevy is forced to speculate about other possibilities. I mean just as a matter of formality."

"Yes, I understand," Welty said. "And you—"

"Sheriff Donlevy's been looking into other possible ways Brennan's body might have been caused to disappear so completely. Knowing my background, that I'd attended Mayberry as a biology student, in Brennan's department, and that I knew my way around here, Donlevy asked me to look about here—discreetly, of course."

"Of course," Welty said. "And you've been looking about."

"Yes, I have, Professor Welty. I have. And the first thing I noticed

was that Grinning Jack—well—didn't really seem to be Grinning Jack."

Only an expert would notice that, Welty thought; *only my very top student.* There were so few of Coulter's caliber, after all, and Welty felt a stir of pride, even at the same time as he felt a wave of dizziness and had to lean a bit to the side to support his weight on the back of a chair.

"Curious, I examined it more closely and I soon saw that it definitely wasn't Grinning Jack. The bones were larger, a bit longer. In fact, I knew that the frame of Grinning Jack had been that of an ectomorph while this one was strictly endomorphic. I asked about it over at the business office and was told that, as far as they knew, Grinning Jack had not been replaced."

Now young Coulter's eyes and voice were even more apologetic and saddened. "I didn't want to be, but I was suspicious and had to continue probing about. Then I saw that there were a number of new additions to the displays of bones in the lab cases . . ."

"Anything else?" Welty asked softly.

"Well—the motive. I knew Brennan wasn't capable of such a brilliant discovery in biospherics, but I felt quite sure that you were. I

mean, I studied under both of you, sir. And I had a hunch that Brennan might have stolen your honors."

Welty blinked quickly behind his blurring glasses. "You—you were quite sure, Tom, that I might have made such a discovery?"

"Of course, sir. A lot of us used to talk about what a brilliant man you were. We used to wonder what on earth you were doing here at Mayberry."

Welty's mouth was full of saliva. He swallowed thickly. "Anything—else?" he asked, his own voice sounding far away.

"I—I dislike this, Professor. It's very painful."

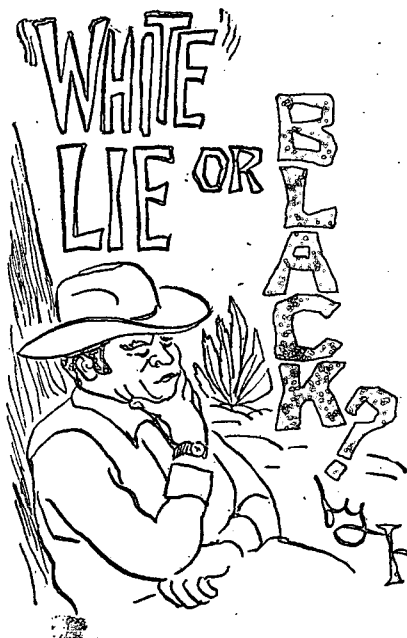
"Of course, Tom." Welty touched Coulter's arm briefly. "Of course, I'm sorry. Yes, I killed Brennan. That saves you and the others any further waste of time." He took a deep breath. "And of mine."

"Thank you," Coulter said, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

As Welty started out the door ahead of Coulter he was unable to resist an impulse to glance back at Grinning Jack. The sight of it seemed to remind Welty of something and he gripped Coulter's arm. "Tom," he said. "Would you see to my rats and guinea pigs—see that they're not taken advantage of, you know?"

Coulter nodded that he would.

Justice might appear disheveled when a wild beast is keeping close behind.



"An unfortunate incident," Detective Victor Fiala said later. "You've got to stay out of his way."

"Unfortunate isn't the word," the embarrassed captain replied. "Ei, his wife must be giving him trouble."

"Or one of his lady friends."

"Or something. He's beginning to act like a madman."

"Luckily, he hasn't bothered me," Fiala said with a smile, and the phone rang on Meza's desk. The captain picked it up, listened, nodded and gently cradled it.

"You spoke too soon, Victor. The

WILD BURSTS OF TEMPER, irrational orders, petty complaints, everything in the book; there they were, all the signs of a troubled man. It was best, these days, to avoid Chief Lopez, if that were possible. Sometimes it wasn't, and Captain Meza received the treatment, a sharp dressing down in, of all places, the patio at headquarters, while a dozen others looked on.

chief wants to see you, and pronto."

"Ei, here it comes."

"Better hurry. The lion is roaring."

"Say a prayer for me," Fiala answered and went out the door.

A few minutes later he stood in the chief's office while Lopez, apparently beside himself, strode the floor like a caged animal. Finally he paused, stared at the detective and

demanding the reason for his presence.

"You sent for me, señor, so I came," Fiala replied.

"Sent for you? You're sadly mistaken. Worse, you—but never mind. There's the door. Close it softly on the way out."

"But I don't understand."

"The door, Victor. If I have to ask you again . . ."

Fiala needed no further warning. Quickly he made for the door—too late again. A firm command halted him and he turned on his heels, his face blank as a board.

"Where do you think you're going?" Lopez demanded.

Humor him? No. Fiala shrugged, and Lopez said, "It seems you don't know whether you're coming or going."

Answer that in kind? Tempted, Fiala thought better of it. He shrugged instead, and drew more venom. "You can't help yourself, so how can you help me?" Lopez snapped.

"Help you?" Fiala said, clearly puzzled.

"That's right. There's a chair. Sit down and listen."

Fiala obeyed and Lopez stared at him again. "This is very embarrassing," he began. "Very, very embarrassing and impossible. Do you hear me, Victor?"

"I'm listening, señor."

"Good. Now what I'm about to relate is highly personal. I don't expect it to be repeated."

Ah, it's about a woman, thought Fiala. The old boy finally trapped himself.

"Highly personal," Lopez went on. "If a word gets out about it, you know what will happen to you."

"No word will get out, señor."

Assured, Lopez wiped his sweating forehead and sat down at his desk. "I've been the victim of a thief," he explained. "There it is, Victor. The chief of police taken by someone with long fingers."

Amused at the revelation, Fiala could barely keep from smiling. "I see what you mean by embarrassing," he said. "If word got out . . ."

"I'd be the laughingstock of the whole city."

"A terrible predicament."

"You don't know the half of it. I've not only been taken, but I know the thief."

"You know him?" Fiala said in surprise.

"Him? The thief happens to be a her, and an old one at that, who's on her last legs."

Something wrong here. Was Lopez pulling his leg? "Permit me, but if you know the lady with taking ways, why should there be a problem?" Fiala asked. "After all, a thief's a thief, male or female, young or old. Let the law—"

"One moment, Victor," Lopez interrupted. "It's not as simple as that. There are special kinds of thieves, you know, and special ways of dealing with them. But some . . ." Lopez shook his head. "There are no ways."

A pessimistic philosophy. For every hook an eye, every question an answer, every thief a day of reckoning. "Pardon me if I contradict you," Fiala said, "but there must be a way."

"Exactly what I thought, but not in this case."

"And what's so special about this case, if I may ask? After all, you know the thief."

"Oh, yes, and how well I know her. You see, she happens to be my mother-in-law."

A startling revelation. "Ah, I see what you mean now," Fiala replied. "You couldn't possibly arrest your own mother-in-law."

"And that's the least of it. The point is, I can't stop her depredations. She's sacking my home. Any item that suits her fancy she takes. Ash trays, dishes, linen; she's even swiped a painting from the wall."

"It hardly seems possible. Are you certain your mother-in-law removed the items?"

"Am I certain? I'd have to be blind, when she takes them to her own place and goes to no trouble to hide them."

"Very strange," Fiala remarked, then reversed himself and added, "and not so strange. I take it the old lady has become a little addled."

"Totally," Lopez almost shouted. "A complete madwoman."

"Therefore, she's not responsible for her actions and, in that case, you can't do very much. But perhaps you could talk to her, tell her she has to stop what she's doing, or you'll—"

"Talk to her? Are you joking, Victor? Do you know, she actually believes all those articles belong to her?"

"Ei, you've a real problem," Fiala said, shaking his head. "But why not have your wife speak to her?"

"My wife? She's as silly as the old woman. No, she couldn't think of claiming our property and unsettling her poor dear mama. That would be cruel and inhuman."

"You can't beat the women," Fiala allowed. "They stick together like thieves, if you'll pardon the expression."

"An apt way of putting it, but I don't intend to let a senile old fool strip me of all my belongings."

"Of course, you want your property back, but wanting it and regaining it—how do you bridge the gap?" Fiala shrugged. "Frankly, I don't think it can be done."

The wrong thing to say. Lopez scowled and said, "It has to be

done, and you'd better find the way. If you don't..."

There was no need for him to finish. Fiala knew what he meant and retracted quickly. "There may be a way," he said, "but it will take some doing—and a little time."

"Then do it, and don't be too long about it," Lopez snapped.

"I'll try, but you'll admit, there are difficulties."

"I'm not interested in difficulties, Victor, nor excuses. I want my property."

Argue with an angry lion? Impossible. Fiala shrugged and said, "I'll need a list of the articles in question."

Promptly Lopez picked up a pen, began to write and finally handed over the sheet of paper.

"All this?" Fiala said with a shudder. "I don't see how—"

"No excuses, Victor," Lopez pointed to the door. "You have twenty-four hours, or you know what."

Groaning, Fiala headed for the door.

When Captain Meza saw him, he asked, "What happened? It looks like the bull gored you."

"Worse than that," Fiala said, and left without explaining the nature of his predicament.

From headquarters he proceeded directly to the Blue Moon restaurant for a cup of bitter black coffee.

The beverage didn't help, and out into the sun he went for a walk around the plaza. That didn't help either. His brain was rusty, thoughts wouldn't come. Another turn around the plaza and he stopped before his favorite bench under a sour orange tree; his "thinking" seat. He sat and tried to think, but his mind stayed blank. A senile old lady had unhorsed him.

An hour later he gave up and headed for the Black Cat, that marvelous cantina where men could forget their cares and drown their problems in the fiery juice of the maguey.

"A double tequila, Pancho," Fiala said as soon as he reached the bar.

The rotund proprietor looked up in surprise. "You're not on duty, Victor?"

"I'm on a merry-go-round."

"With Lopez on your back. What is it this time?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe it."

"Then perhaps you'd better forget the tequila."

"Never mind the advice. Let me have—"

"Coming up, senor."

The conversation ended there, but not the tequila. It came forthwith, and continued to come, and the long hot afternoon burned out. Darkness fell, a cool wind blew

down from the mountains across the city and the thirsty patrons of the Black Cat crowded the cantina, all good friends of Fiala, but none greeted him, seeing the funk he was in. All through the evening he drank alone, unable to solve the problem Lopez had presented him. Midnight came and he rolled out of the Black Cat.

Go home? Impossible. He made for the small plaza and the Blue Moon in back of headquarters. Black coffee there to straighten him out. It didn't. Too much fire of the maguey in his veins: Beaten, he'd slipped from his stool and turned to the door when it opened and in stepped a small man with sharp features and the eyes of a ferret: Francisco Garza, a thief without grace or mercy who, as others had it, would steal the crutches from his crippled grandmother. A slippery customer, well known to the police and in particular to Fiala, who eyed him with distaste. Of thieves he'd had enough, but suddenly it dawned on him. Here was a man whose wayward talents might be twisted to good purpose.

"Senor Garza." The slippery one had gone to his usual table in back of the restaurant. At mention of his name he raised his eyes to Fiala and knew immediately that something was askew. One: the detective was obviously in his cups. Two: Fiala

was grinning at him, which was most unusual.

"Just the man I'm looking for," Fiala said.

"Looking for? But I've done nothing wrong, senor."

"Of course you haven't. You're innocent as a baby," Fiala laughed. "Now, then, I've a job for you."

"For me? I don't understand."

"Of course you don't, but allow me." Quickly, then, Fiala explained what he had in mind. When he finished, Garza gaped at him and finally said, "You must be joking."

"Not at all. Now what do you think?"

A frame-up. It was as cut and dried as that. "Nothing doing," Garza said, rejecting the odd proposal.

"Nothing doing?" Fiala drew back his head, the grin faded from his face. "Are you forgetting a little debt, my friend? After all . . ."

Garza swallowed hard. The detective had been lenient with him for a past indiscretion, but now he was demanding payment in blood. "And what if I'm caught?" Garza asked, knowing he couldn't refuse.

"I'm not interested in suppositions," Fiala replied. "Are you going to do the job?"

Having no choice, Garza nodded, asked for the particulars, and Fiala handed over the list Lopez had given him, told him where

the house was located and said, "I expect to see you in the morning with the goods."

"But, senor—"

"That's all. Good luck, my friend."

Early the next morning Fiala was awakened by his daughter, Aurora. "Better get up," she said. "Someone to see you."

"At this hour? Tell him to come back later. My head's splitting."

"I've already told him, but he said it was very important."

Fiala groaned, got out of bed and went to the door. His caller? Senor Garza. The slippery one greeted him sourly and shook his head like a man who's been to the Bottomless Pit. Bad signs. Besides, he was as empty-handed as a beggar. "Don't tell me you failed," Fiala said.

"No, senor, but it was a most difficult job. I had to—"

"Never mind the details, Garza. Where's the stuff?"

"In your car. I didn't think it was a good idea to lug it to the door."

"Good thinking," Fiala said, suddenly smiling and relieved. "I'm most grateful."

"Ei, don't mention it, but no more jobs like that. All those items, I had to make three trips into the house."

"But you did it," Fiala chuckled.

"You're a very talented fellow, I don't mind saying. No one else in Montes could have pulled off a job like that."

A compliment, but coming from Fiala, the remark had a curious ring. Still, Garza managed a grin, then turned on his heels and hurried off.

"Who was that character?" Aurora asked when her father entered the kitchen.

"Just an acquaintance," Fiala answered.

"Hm, some of the people you know. I sometimes wonder."

Fiala chuckled and sat down at the table. "In my profession, one gets to know all sorts, good, bad and indifferent. The fellow you saw at the door? Not good, but certainly not all bad—and very obliging. He did me a great favor last evening."

"No doubt he guided you home from the Black Cat," Aurora said tartly.

"No, it wasn't as simple as that. Anyway, I didn't need him, nor anyone else to guide me home, but we won't discuss my drinking. Now, if you don't mind, I'll have a cup of black coffee before I leave for work."

Gently reprimanded, Aurora poured for her father, and ten minutes later he left the house. Driving to headquarters, he de-

posited the burlap bag at the door of Lopez' office, then went off to the Blue Moon for another cup of black coffee.

It was almost noon when the chief arrived at headquarters and found the burlap bag. A glance at its contents was enough. He picked up the phone, called Captain Meza and asked for Fiala. At that moment, the detective stepped into the office. Meza dropped the instrument and looked up with a grin. "The executioner wishes to see you immediately, Victor."

"To lop off my head?" Fiala shrugged and went up to see the chief.

The lion was in his den, but his claws had been drawn, his teeth pulled and he didn't roar. "Ah, so you did it," he cried when Fiala stepped into the office. "Sit down, Victor. Have a cigar, and take the rest of the day off but, first, let's hear it. What did you do, hypnotize the old witch, or what?"

Tell the chief the truth? Too risky. Fiala lit his cigar. A white lie would have to suffice, but—suddenly his mind went blank. White lie, or black lie, neither was available.

"Well?" said Lopez, growing impatient.

"It's a long story," Fiala began, without knowing where he was going, and the door burst open

and in marched Lopez' crown-of-thorns, his hatchet-faced mother-in-law, screaming at the top of her lungs.

Patient for once, Lopez leaned back in his chair, waited and at last the storm subsided. "A terrible thing to happen," he said, shaking his head. "All those beautiful things stolen while you slept, but don't worry, you'll have them back with the help of Senor Fiala, the best detective we have." Lopez nodded to Fiala and winked. It was a signal not to be ignored.

With a bow, Fiala took it from there. "Senora, if you will please name the stolen articles again, I will do my best to catch the thief."

Silence in the office. Silence from the senora, and a troubled look in her eyes. For the life of her, she couldn't remember a single one of the many items she'd named so loudly but a minute ago. Poor old woman. Dazed, she turned and went out the door.

"Gone and good riddance," Lopez said, smacking his desk.

"It's terrible to get too old," Fiala put in.

"Never mind the sentiment, Victor. Let's get back to the subject. How did you manage to get my things back?"

White lie or black lie, neither would do. And the truth? "It's a long story," Fiala began.

It is said that a patient man shuffles the cards until he senses the materialization of a strong hand.

COOL CUSTOMER

*by Mel
Tanburn*

HERMAN GOLD WAS FREEZING. His frail shoulders shivered beneath the threadbare sweater he wore against the cold in his grocery store. It was night, and Herman Gold's tiny store was cold because he couldn't afford to turn up the heat, because business was bad. Business was always bad. In the summertime, Herman Gold suffered from the heat inside his store because he couldn't afford air-conditioning; but now it was winter, and Herman was freezing.

Okay, Herman thought decisively. *Tonight I'll do it.* All winter long, he'd had a fantasy about keeping warm by wrapping himself in a big sheet of plastic wrap, the kind that comes in rolls and is used to store food; the transparent kind that sticks to itself.

His theory was that the plastic would trap his body heat to warm

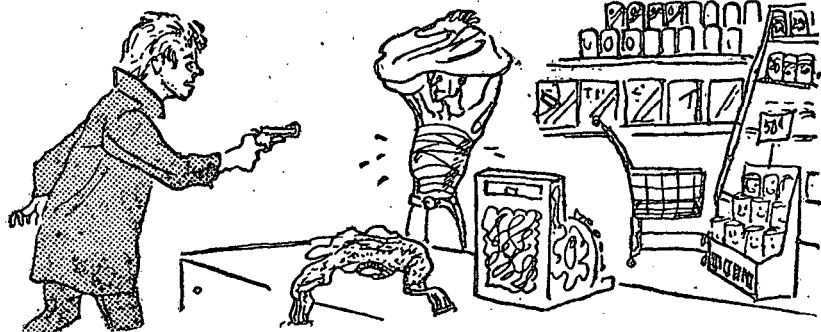
him, like a skin diver's wet-suit. *So it's crazy,* he thought. *So what? So is keeping the store open this late at night crazy. So is not having any money crazy.* Still, he felt foolish as he took off his sweater and shirt and undershirt, exposing his skinny, old man's body. For once he hoped a customer *wouldn't* come into his store, at least not until he had time to wrap himself in a coil of plastic.

Herman looked ruefully at the price—39 cents—on the cardboard tube containing the plastic. He wasn't even sure he would make that much profit before closing up. He wrapped the plastic around his chest and abdomen and hurriedly got dressed again. He felt uncom-

fortable, but maybe it would help.

Five minutes later the front door opened. Herman hoped it was a good customer, but it turned out to be a young man carrying a gun.

"Empty the till and gimme the dough," the kid said.



Herman started to perspire. He didn't know if it was from the plastic or the holdup. He raised his eyes, as if in prayer, and silently cursed his bad luck. He had a gun himself, in a drawer near the cash register, but he couldn't get to it. Besides, Herman couldn't remember if it were loaded.

"Hurry up, old man," the robber said, waving his gun at Herman.

Herman decided to try to talk the kid out of it. He doubted that he had more than thirty dollars in his cash register, but that was a lot of money to Herman. The way business was, that was sometimes a week's profits.

"I'm going to do something," Herman said as he raised his hands

and held them shoulder-high, so the kid wouldn't get too nervous. "What I'm going to do is this—in a minute I'm going to take my sweater off. When I do, I don't want you to do anything impetuous. Just wait until I'm through.

Okay? It'll just take a second."

"Why? You keep the dough in a money belt?" the robber asked. He kept the gun pointed at Herman.

"You'll see," Herman said, making gentling motions with his hands. "Now just watch for a minute." He hoped the kid was as stupid as he looked.

The robber started to protest, but Herman ignored him and stripped off his sweater, shirt and undershirt. The plastic glistened on his body.

The kid stared at him. "What's *that*?"

"Explosive material," Herman said calmly. "*Plastique*, the French call it. Hit it too hard, and boom!" Herman snapped his fingers. "It'll

take out the whole damn block.” The kid’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding.”

Herman chuckled. “You know, it’s a good thing you didn’t shoot,” he said. “If you put a bullet through this stuff, there wouldn’t be enough pieces of us left to put in a paper sack. As a matter of fact, if you even just slapped me on the back, you’d blow us both to kingdom come.”

The young robber looked skeptically at Herman. “I don’t believe you.”

“Then why did you put the gun down?” Herman smiled.

The kid looked at his gun. He was holding it slack in his hand, pointing it at the floor. “Are you telling the truth?” he asked.

Herman began to walk out from behind the counter. If he were telling the truth, he knew, the plastic would already have blown up, just from his heartbeat. He cursed once again the rotten business in his grocery store. Why couldn’t a customer come in and rescue him?

Herman hoped his appearance didn’t betray his emotions. “Sure I’m telling the truth,” he told the robber. “Do you think I’d stay open in this neighborhood at night without some kind of protection? Why, if someone just knocked me down, we’d both blow up before he could get away. With this *plastique*,

I’m burglar-proof.” He was telling the truth about the neighborhood. Except for the liquor store on the corner, there wasn’t a light on the deserted street.

“Stay away from me!” the kid screamed, backing away when Herman came out from behind the counter. “Don’t touch me with that weird stuff! You’re a crazy old man!”

Crazy like a fox, Herman thought, as his bluff worked. So far, he had just been stalling for time, but when the kid panicked Herman had an inspiration.

“You’re right about being crazy,” Herman said craftily. “I don’t care if I live or die. I have an incurable disease and the pain gets worse every day. That’s why I almost wish you *would* have shot me. You see that car parked out in front?” he asked sharply.

“Yeah, why?” the kid asked as he kept backing away from the grocer.

Herman pointed a thumb at the plastic wrapped around his chest. “In a gasoline explosion, this stuff would take out a whole neighborhood.”

“So what?”

“So this,” Herman said. “You’re going to take that gun of yours and hold up the liquor store. Then you’re going to come back here with the money. If you’re not back

in three minutes, I'm going to do a running swan dive into that car. You'll never know what hit you."

The kid stared at Herman, with white showing all around the irises of his eyes. "You're nuts!" he said. "Weird!"

Herman spread his arms and ran toward the robber. "I'll hug you right now!"

"No!" the kid screamed, running out the door. "I'll do it!"

Herman paused only long enough to wipe the perspiration from his brow. For the time being, he had almost forgotten about the cold, and he hastened to unwrap the plastic from his body and put his clothes back on.

When the kid came running back into the store, Herman was behind the counter again. His right hand was below the counter, out of sight, but now holding his gun. It was loaded.

"I gotta get out of here fast," the kid panted. "We gonna split this money?"

"Throw it on the counter," Herman said.

The kid put the money on the counter. It looked like about a hundred dollars.

"Let me see your gun again," Herman said.

"Huh?" The kid pulled his gun out from his belt and looked questioningly at Herman.

Herman shot him three times before the kid hit the floor.

The grocer quickly plucked two ten-dollar bills from the counter, then rang up a no-sale on his ancient cash register and put the tens inside. He put a twenty in his wallet and stuffed the rest of the money into the kid's jacket pocket.

Then he ran to his front door and shouted, "Help! Holdup! Get the police! I shot someone!"

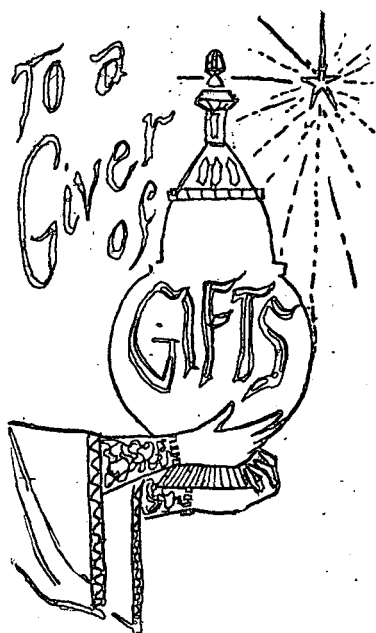
The man from the liquor store came running almost on Herman's echo. "It's him, the robber!" he said, when he saw the kid on Herman's floor. He knelt and rummaged through the kid's pockets, smiling when he found the roll of bills Herman had replaced. He showed the wad to Herman. "This is what he got from me."

Herman pointed to the telephone. "Call the cops, will you?" he said. "I feel weak."

The man from the liquor store made the phone call. As they waited for the police to arrive, he said, "You ought to heat this place, Herman. It's cold as a tomb. No wonder you don't get any customers in here." He shivered.

"Maybe I will begin to heat it at night. I suppose I can afford it for the rest of the winter," Herman said, smiling. "Actually, I took in a few bucks more tonight than I thought I would."

He who is blind to the giver within is truly gifted.



I stood watching the slowly swirling snow drift to oblivion on the wet streets below, a dull headache and a sore throat hinting I'd have a cold before the day was over. It was early yet, this day before Christmas, but later those streets would be jammed with last minute shoppers, and I was happy my shopping was finished except for one purchase which was going to

be a long-coveted gift to myself.

"Mr. Stoneman!" The small intercom on my desk whispered.

I was so startled, I almost dropped my coffee. Chetkos never used the intercom, being old-fashioned enough to shout when he wanted someone. Wondering why he'd used it this time, I moved quickly to the door between the two offices and threw it open, perhaps expecting to find him suffering a heart attack.

There was nothing wrong with him. He sat in his huge leather chair, unruly white hair haloed by the light from the window, leaning solicitously toward a woman seated by his desk.

The woman was very thin and not young, her face lined and worried, wrinkled hands twisting the strap of her purse. The cloth coat

by Stephen
Wasyluk

was threadbare and many years out of style. Something about the color of her skin set me thinking until I realized she had been ill recently and the hospital pallor still showed.

"Mrs. Brubaker, this is Mr. Stoneman."

I nodded. "Of course. Mrs. Brubaker runs the newspaper stand in the building lobby."

"My husband does," she said.

"That's the difficulty," said Chetkos. "Mr. Brubaker has disappeared, so Mrs. Brubaker had to take over."

"I'm sorry to hear it. I wondered what had become of Alex." I said to Chetkos, "Are you going to contact Missing Persons for her?"

"She has already been there—several days ago. They can't seem to help. Since she heard her husband speak of me, she thought I might be able to do something."

I knew why Alex had talked about the old man. Chetkos had a wide acquaintance among the people who worked in and around the building, and they all liked and respected the friendly, courteous old gentleman.

"Perhaps we can get some action," I said. "I know Lieutenant Kylie."

He turned to Mrs. Brubaker. "You see? I told you Mr. Stoneman was good at these things."

I grinned. People were always

coming to him for help, and he just as regularly volunteered my services.

"The law firm of Chetkos and Stoneman will do its best," I said gallantly. "When did Alex disappear?"

"Mrs. Brubaker was in the hospital. They released her last week. Alex brought her home, said he was going out for a minute and never came back. The police checked their records and all the hospitals without success. He is neither in prison nor injured."

"Could he have left town for some reason?"

"No," she said firmly. "He wouldn't go away without telling me."

I thought that was exactly what he had done, but said nothing. Chetkos asked her a few more questions, we promised to keep in touch and I escorted her to the elevator.

Chetkos was gazing speculatively at the ceiling when I came back.

"I deliberately said nothing about the morgue," I remarked.

"You needn't have been so sensitive. She has checked."

"Evaluation?" I asked.

"Mr. Brubaker has dropped from sight for some reason unknown to us. If we ascertain the cause, perhaps we will know where to look."

"You don't think it is any of the

usual reasons for disappearing?"

He lifted his shoulders. "Mr. Brubaker cares deeply for Mrs. Brubaker. He was quite concerned while she was in the hospital and was looking forward to having her home, especially in time for Christmas."

I walked to his window. The snow was swirling more thickly now and my headache was worse. If Alex Brubaker had been anxious to have his wife home, he certainly wasn't planning on leaving. My fingers drummed on the window-sill.

"You are not exceptionally busy today?" asked Chetkos.

"Not until after the holidays."

"Fine. It is an ideal time of year to help a fellow man."

"You aren't giving me much time," I complained. "Tomorrow is Christmas."

"We can only try. I couldn't enjoy Christmas knowing Mrs. Brubaker was alone, worried about her husband, and I had done nothing to help."

I learned early that Chetkos' idea of a perfect Christmas was making sure the people around him enjoyed theirs, and I was never able to determine how many charities he'd adopted or how he spent Christmas Day, although his face always wore a very pleased expression when he arrived for Christmas

dinner, customarily, at our house.

"I'll call Lieutenant Kylie, of course. No sense duplicating anything Missing Persons has already done."

"He may have overlooked something."

"Not Kylie," I said firmly.

"Wear your overshoes if you go out," he said.

I chuckled. For twenty years, he had varied between placing me in awkward situations and giving me homey advice; ever since I joined him out of law school and he brought me along, teaching me all he'd learned, finally making me his partner, and reluctantly admitting that somehow he'd made me a good attorney.

I was right—Kylie had overlooked nothing. I hung up and stared thoughtfully into space before going back to Chetkos. "Kylie can't help. How long was Mrs. Brubaker in the hospital?"

"Quite some time. She was ill before that."

"Which hospital was she in?"

"Northeast."

I went back to the phone and dialed the hospital. The woman in the office sounded bored.

"You had a patient named Mrs. Alex Brubaker," I told her. "I understand Mr. Brubaker still owes some money on his bill. I'd like to know how much. I intend to give

Mr. Brubaker the money as a Christmas gift."

"We cannot give out that information," she said primly. "You will have to ask Mr. Brubaker."

"I want to surprise him, not embarrass him," I said. "Surely you could break a rule at this time of year and do the hospital a service at the same time?"

The thought of the hospital collecting an unpaid bill intrigued her. "Just a moment," she said.

I closed my eyes and leaned back, waiting for her.

"There must be some mistake," she said finally. "Mrs. Brubaker's bill is paid in full."

"Strange. I thought Mr. Brubaker owed a thousand dollars." I'd picked the figure from thin air, to see what the reaction would be.

"Hardly, since that was the amount of the bill."

"I appreciate your efforts," I told her. "Thank you very much."

After replacing the phone, I went to the window to check on the snow. It was just beginning to coat the streets. Where would someone like Brubaker get a thousand dollars, especially after his wife had been ill for some time? I was willing to bet he had to borrow it, unless he had some sort of hospital insurance. An idea began to take shape.

Whether I wanted to or not, I'd

have to go out, I thought wryly, reaching for my aspirin bottle.

Slipping into my coat reluctantly, I remembered the errand I'd been saving for today. I made one more phone call.

"Hewitt? This is Stoneman. You still have the pistols?"

"I still have them, Mr. Stoneman," he said.

"Hold on to them. I'll be by as soon as possible to pick them up."

Hewitt groaned. "That may be difficult, Mr. Stoneman. A brace of matched 18th century dueling pistols like these are worth a great deal of money. I've had a great many offers."

"Hide them. I told you I needed them for my collection."

"I'll not hide them, Mr. Stoneman. If someone tops your offer, I'll have to let them go."

"No! I'll match any offer you get."

"A bird in the hand, Mr. Stoneman. I'll hold them for only an hour."

I groaned. Hewitt had found a pair of beautifully decorated and inlaid pistols, still in their original velvet-lined box, among some antiques he'd picked up recently, and was anxious to sell them since guns weren't his line. He'd been receiving offers from collectors and dealers, waiting for the highest price, until I came along. He'd

promised them to me, but only if I picked them up today.

"You hold them," I said. "A deal is a deal."

As I passed through the outer office, my secretary called, "Better wear your overshoes, Mr. Stoneman."

I grunted. What neither she nor Chetkos knew was, they were nestled in a closet at home.

In the lobby, Mrs. Brubaker was still behind the newsstand. I motioned to her. "Mrs. Brubaker, do you and Alex have medical insurance?"

She shook her head sadly. "Alex doesn't believe in insurance."

"Where did the money come from to pay for your illness and the hospital?"

Her eyes glistened wetly. "Our savings first, and then Alex borrowed from the bank across the street."

"How much did he borrow?"

"He wouldn't tell me. He didn't want me to worry."

I smiled and patted her shoulder. "Then don't worry."

Outside, the air was cold and penetrating, the snow beginning to form a slippery slush. I would probably end with pneumonia.

His red suit bulging, his snow-soaked false beard and hair matted, a grotesquely padded Santa Claus looked cold enough to pack up his

kettle and call it a day. I tossed in a coin as I passed to encourage him to hold out a while longer. Another, stationed across the street, watched with envious eyes.

I had always had a soft spot for these nameless men who cropped up everywhere in the city during the Christmas season, swinging their tinny bells and soliciting funds for various charities, and had suffered through it myself one hard winter when I was a virtually penniless law student. They stood mute, swinging their bells, no matter what the weather, almost ignored by everyone except the children and an occasional passerby, and they did it for a hot meal, a place to sleep and sometimes a few dollars. If most looked bedraggled, they had good cause.

The traffic paused and I crossed to the dry warmth of the bank. Cam Vegas saw me coming and left his desk, hand extended.

"Hoping I'd see you before Christmas, John. Wanted to ask you and Rhea to stop by during the holidays."

"Nothing my wife would like better, Cam. In the meantime, how would you like to break one of the bank's rules?"

"Big rule or small?"

"You tell me. I want to know if someone named Brubaker borrowed money and how much."

He hesitated. "Is it important, John?"

"The man is missing. I'm trying to locate him. The money may have a bearing on his disappearance."

He thought it over. "All right," he said finally. "I'll go along. Maybe I can get another job as a vice-president somewhere. What's his full name?"

"Alex Brubaker."

Watching the traffic in the street outside as I waited, I saw the snow wasn't holding down the crowds. They were piling up, walking slower, loaded down with packages.

Cam came back. "With his credit background, the best we could do for Mr. Brubaker was five hundred dollars."

I stroked my chin. "That leaves him five hundred short. Any ideas?"

"Loan company, perhaps, or another bank if he didn't tell them about this loan."

"Would that be the usual thing to do?"

"It might be the usual thing to try, but some people don't lie too well. An experienced loan officer could spot it."

I shook his hand. "See you over the holidays, Cam. We'll call first. And thanks. If you get fired, let me know."

"You'll be the first," he said drily.

I stood in the snow, thinking

that my first hunch had been right, before slithering through the slush to the cabstand at the corner.

I should have known better than to expect to get a cab in this weather. I turned my coat collar up and began to walk. Someone like Brubaker would know of only one way to get the money he needed.

Ten blocks later, I turned in under a sign that said *Frankie's* and headed for the rear of the restaurant.

A big man with a hard square face blocked my way. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To see Frankie."

"He expecting you?"

"No."

"Then he's not in."

"Tell him Stoneman wants to see him," I said mildly.

"I said he's not in."

My headache didn't help my short temper. "Junior," I said softly, "even if it is the day before Christmas, don't push. I know you're just a messenger boy around here, so take the message in to your boss and stop pretending you're someone important. Besides, you know Frankie doesn't like trouble in his restaurant."

The flat eyes gleamed. "Some kinds of trouble he don't mind at all."

"You going or not?" I asked.

His answer was to bring his left

up hard and fast at my mid-section, which was what I was expecting. I twisted, caught his wrist, pulled, spun and tossed him over my hip into a table. He disappeared in a cloud of minestrone and lasagna, smothered by a variety of screams and startled yells.

I kept going and opened the door. The crash had brought the hawk-faced, well-dressed man inside to his feet.

"Hello, Frankie," I said.

He nodded. "Stoneman. You the cause of all the noise?"

"Your man decided you didn't want to see me."

The bodyguard came up and put a rough hand on my shoulder.

"Cool it, Silas," said Frankie.

"This guy—"

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know. Just look at him and remember him. He gets in any time he wants to see me, understand?"

"I'll remember him," Silas said grimly.

"Remember something else," Frankie said wearily. "You never saw the day when you could take him alone, so don't try. Now close the door."

"I'm sorry for the trouble, Frankie," I said.

He waved. "Don't be sorry, Stoneman. He'll learn. What can I do for you?"

"I don't know if you'll want to

do anything, but if you do, what you tell me will be in confidence."

He nodded. "I learned that at my trial, Stoneman."

It had been only six months now since they'd brought Frankie up for murder, and I'd proved he couldn't have done it. Working out the solution meant he had to tell me a great deal about the loan shark racket in the city and how it operated. The information was still locked in my brain, but he knew that as much as I'd like to use it, I wouldn't.

"I think an old man named Alex Brubaker borrowed some money. I'd like to know how much and the status of the loan."

He frowned. "You're asking for rather specific information. Why?"

"The old man has disappeared. Maybe your boys know something."

He leaned back, looking at me coldly. "That might be bad information for you to have."

"It's better than none."

He leaned forward and dialed. "Brubaker, Alex," he said into the mouthpiece, waited, listened and hung up.

"He's in for five hundred. Hasn't paid back a dime and he's overdue. We're looking for him ourselves, so you'd better find him before we do."

"Any idea why he disappeared?"

"Probably because he can't pay."

I waved a hand. "I'll guarantee his loan." I grinned. "I'll give you a check now, if it will help."

He drew back, horrified. "No checks, Stoneman! You know better! And no cash directly from you. You find him and give him the money."

I stood up. "You'll see nothing happens to him?"

"It just don't work that way, Stoneman. They have their orders and we can't make exceptions. The only way I could change it is to pay the five hundred myself, and I'm not about to do that for an old man I don't even know."

"Then I'd better locate him before you do." I lifted a hand. "Thanks, Frankie." At the door, I turned. "Frankie?"

He looked up.

"Have a merry Christmas."

I left him in a state of shock, as if it had been years since anyone said that to him. Outside, the thickening snow had covered the sidewalks and streets. A cab pulled up as I went through the door.

She came out of the cab long legs first, and I grinned in appreciation. Then, as she straightened, the high heels slipped in the snow and she went down, one leg twisted beneath her. Her sharp cry pulled me to her side.

I helped her to her feet. She winced as she put her weight on

her right foot. Her eyes clouded.

"Easy," I said.

The cabbie came sliding around the front of the cab too late to help. "She should have waited," he said uneasily.

"Forget that," I said. "Help me get her inside the restaurant."

We found a chair and I reached down and fingered the ankle gently. She gasped.

I looked up at her. "Bad sprain. Might be broken. You'll have trouble getting a doctor in this weather. Want to go to the hospital?"

Frankie was there suddenly, kneeling, holding her hands in his. "You all right, baby?" His voice was anxious.

"Her ankle, Frankie," I said. "She needs attention. You have a doctor handy?"

"Nuts with that," he said. "I want her to go to the hospital and have it X-rayed."

"Dad," she said softly, "it's not that bad."

I stared. She was young, blonde, and enough to make any man look twice—and it was very hard to believe she was Frankie's daughter.

"While you two argue about it, the ankle gets worse," I said.

"You're a lawyer, punk, not a doctor," said Silas.

I looked at him approvingly. "You learned who I was. Good for you." I turned to Frankie. "Take



the cab and get her to the hospital, Frankie."

He glanced at his watch and his face fell. "I can't. I have an important appointment."

"Frankie," I said in an injured

tone. "She's your beloved daughter."

His face twisted. "I can't be late for this man," he said slowly. "You understand, Stoneman?"

Which meant he had to report to someone who had a great deal more

power than he did. It surprised me. I always thought Frankie was one of the real top men.

"Do me a favor, Stoneman. See that she's taken care of." He wasn't the type to plead, but he was close to it now.

"Frankie, I've got to find Brubaker; and time is getting short. Let Silas take her."

"I can't have a punk like that seen with my daughter, Stoneman."

I thought of time running out on me. I thought of my headache, my sore throat and my soaked shoes. And I thought of Chetkos saying there was no better time of year to help your fellowman. Perhaps there was a bonus in helping a man like Frankie. I sighed. "All right, Frankie. I'll take care of her."

Two hours later, after paying a healthy cab bill, I carried her through the snow to Frankie's apartment house, enlisted the doorman and helped prop her sprained ankle on a soft pillow in Frankie's well-furnished suite.

The time had not been entirely lost.

I'd learned she was finishing college in the spring, her name was Joyce, Frankie obviously doted on her and she was an exceedingly pleasant young woman.

Leaving her in the care of the servants, I headed toward Hewitt's shop at a fast walk to pick up my

pistols. Looking like one of his little porcelain gnomes, Hewitt refused to meet my eyes.

"You sold them," I said angrily.

"Don't lose your temper, Mr. Stoneman."

"I told you I'd meet any price."

"This customer was very insistent."

I wondered how long it would be before I found another pair of pistols like the ones he sold. "Hewitt," I said softly, "you have just ruined my Christmas."

"Look at it this way, Mr. Stoneman. I have made someone else happy."

Morose walking back through the early afternoon crowds, I wondered if Chetkos could contribute anything at this point. So far I hadn't accomplished much more than to lose out on the pistols, acquire a pair of wet feet and help my cold get a firm grip. Find out why, Chetkos had said, and we'll know where to look. Well, I'd found out why, and Brubaker was still missing.

The Santa Claus, reluctant to let the last few hours before the holiday slip away, was still in front of the building, swinging his bell stiffly. Above the beard, the face was white and pinched.

"Hold on for a while, old man," I advised. "With everyone leaving after Christmas parties, you might

do all right." I poked a folded bill into his kettle and went inside.

As I thought, the parties were well under way, having started at noon. Our offices were deserted except for Chetkos.

"You should be down the hall with everyone else from this floor, lifting your voice in Christmas carols," I said.

He chuckled. "At my age, I am incapable of lifting anything, including my voice. I am more interested in what you have discovered."

"I found out why Mr. Brubaker disappeared. He borrowed five hundred dollars from his friendly loan shark with no way to pay it back, so he wisely took a powder before they discovered it."

Chetkos glanced up sharply. "You don't suppose they have harmed . . ."

"Not yet. He took off before they had the chance, but if they locate him before we do, he's in trouble. And keep in mind they have more men looking."

"For the moment, then, he's alive and well."

"A valid assumption. The question is, where?"

"Let us approach the problem logically," said Chetkos. "First, it is necessary for Mr. Brubaker to exist, to have a place to sleep and food to eat. He cannot be in limbo."

"Which means he could be any-

where in the city," I reminded him.

"Not really. He would utilize the knowledge at his command, the things and the people that are familiar to him. Concern for Mrs. Brubaker would keep him from straying too far. If she should need him, he would want to be close."

"I'll see Lieutenant Kylie the day after Christmas. He can probably give us some help."

He rose with a sigh. "Meanwhile, I suggest we make our way down the hall and extend our best wishes to our employees and the others on this floor. Our absence would be noted and remarked upon if we do not, even though we have made our monetary contribution."

The last thing in the world either of us wanted at that moment was to join a Christmas party. I took two more aspirin.

Leaning on his cane, Chetkos walked much more slowly than usual, and I knew he was turning the problem of Brubaker over in that fine old mind.

We had started out to locate Brubaker merely to help his wife. We had to find him now to keep him from getting beaten or perhaps even killed. The loan shark boys weren't noted for their gentleness, especially when someone borrowed money with no intention of repaying it.

The party was a noisy, controlled

turmoil. There would be many headaches and regrets in the morning.

Manny Modello, whose office was next to ours, joined us. "The only thing missing is Santa Claus. We have everything else." His face was flushed, his eyes bright.

"There's one downstairs on the street," I said jokingly. "Why don't you go get him? He looks like he needs something to warm him up."

Manny snapped his fingers. "I'll do just that."

"Someone else should be invited," said Chetkos. "Perhaps the party will cheer up Mrs. Brubaker."

"You think of how to explain the disappearance," I said. "I'll bring her up."

I found her behind the newsstand.

"Any news, Mr. Stoneman?" she asked.

"Mr. Chetkos will tell you about it," I said.

Manny was dragging a reluctant Santa through the door. "It's just a party," he was saying. "You'll enjoy yourself."

"What's he doing with that poor old man?" asked Mrs. Brubaker.

"He wants him to go to a Christmas party. We'd like you to come up, too."

She shrank back. "I couldn't."

Manny was still dragging the reluctant Santa toward the eleva-

tor. I realized that he was overdoing the spirit of good fellowship. "Let him go, Manny!"

Manny released him and he scuttled out the door. "What's a Christmas party without a Santa Claus?" he complained. "That guy must be Scrooge in disguise."

I turned back to Mrs. Brubaker. "No party then, if that's what you want, but come along to talk to Mr. Chetkos."

We were halfway up in the elevator when the thought hit me. I let Mrs. Brubaker off, told her where to find Chetkos and punched the ground floor button again.

Two men had Santa by the arms and were trying to force him into a car at the curb, and I knew they didn't want a Santa for any Christmas party. The snow muffled my footsteps as I walked up behind them. I yanked the first one's overcoat down, pinning his arms, spun him and hit him hard on the jaw. The second let go of Santa and reached inside his coat. I kicked him in the groin and chopped him across the neck when he doubled. The driver had started to move at the first sign of trouble and was halfway around the car when I stopped him with a hard glare.

"Get them out of here," I said. "And if you want to know my name, it's Stoneman. Frankie will

tell you later where to find me."

I took the Santa by the arm and led him through the gaping crowd to the lobby. "Now that you've fouled things up, Alex, suppose you come with me."

He drew back. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on," I said tiredly. "You're Alex Brubaker. That's why those two were trying to hustle you into the car. What do you expect me to believe? That they wanted you to distribute toys at a children's party?"

He sagged. "It was close," he admitted. "If you hadn't come along . . . But how did you know, Mr. Stoneman?"

"You wanted to drop out of sight but still keep an eye on your wife, so you decided to play Santa Claus. No one looks very closely at street Santas. It was a good idea, as long as it worked. People who saw you every day never recognized you beneath all that padding. How could the loan sharks? But you forgot they can think and add two and two. That's their business. The thing I would like to know is, what did you think you were going to do after Christmas?"

"I would have thought of something."

"I'll bet," I said drily. "Now let's go find your wife. She's worried long enough."

Mrs. Brubaker was with Chetkos in his office. I gave Santa a gentle push. "Here's your husband, Mrs. Brubaker."

She stared.

I reached up and pulled off Santa's hat and wig. He removed the false beard.

She gave a little cry and collapsed against his wet, red suit.

Chetkos and I left them alone and retreated to my office.

"How did you know?" asked Chetkos.

"Manny mentioned disguise. It was all I needed."

"Excellent," he murmured. "It is something for which I wish I could take credit. Strange she didn't recognize him though."

"She simply wasn't conditioned to think that way. It never occurred to her that Alex could be so close. The way he bundled himself up, there was no way to tell."

I wiggled my toes in my wet shoes, realizing I was tired, although my cold felt a little better.

He smiled happily. Nothing pleased Chetkos more than helping people.

"The problem isn't over yet," I said. I told him about the two men. "He still has to pay them off. I thought we'd lend him the money."

"Of course," he said.

Silas poked his square head

through the doorway. "Stoneman?"

"He went home early," I said.

He held out a large white envelope. "From Frankie."

I slit it open. It was a Christmas card with the usual holiday message, but not signed. Instead, Frankie had printed in block letters, *Debt cancelled. Will take care of details. Call it a Christmas gift from Joyce.*

I thought of the moral effort it must have cost Frankie and grinned. With no more trouble to anticipate, I felt myself relax. Evidently, Frankie hadn't had time to notify those three I just tangled with downstairs.

"Tell him we thank him," I said. "Merry Christmas, Silas."

He glared at me. "Bah!" he said.

Chetkos and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

I handed him the card.

"My Christmas is now complete," Chetkos said after reading it.

"Good," I said, thinking that mine would have been if Hewitt hadn't sold the pistols.

He looked at me closely. "I detect a certain hoarseness in your voice. Could it be possible you are catching cold?"

"It is not only possible, but extremely likely."

He led the way into his office.

Mr. and Mrs. Brubaker had gone.

"They never even thanked us," I noted.

"It is not important that they do," said Chetkos. "To a giver of gifts, all things are returned manyfold." He reached into a bottom desk drawer. "I have here a remedy for colds which modern medical science does not entirely endorse. I have, however, found it very effective in the past. I recommend a hearty dose."

He poured a good three fingers of his fine old bourbon into a glass for me and splashed some into another for himself.

He pointed at a package on his desk. "Something for you, I believe."

I unwrapped the package carefully, knowing from the size and the feel what it was before I opened it. How he did it I didn't know, but eavesdropping wasn't beneath him and the secretaries in the office always told him everything that went on, anyway.

The pistols gleamed, and I hadn't felt so good all day.

I lifted my glass. "Thank you and merry Christmas to you, Mr. Chetkos."

"Merry Christmas to you, Mr. Stoneman."

I always thought he was the closest thing to Santa Claus any of us would ever see.

Every successful "brain buster" is aware, of course, that a mickle of logic, salted with common sense, inevitably implements a banner harvest.



a church across the way put a bullet in his shoulder through the window. Teddy had second thoughts—and talked.

Professor George Meeger, former inspector of police, was responsible for the arrest. For the last ten years on the force, he'd had all of the truly "brain buster" type cases. Because he had solved most of

by Edward
Y. Breese

them, it became a habit to overload him.

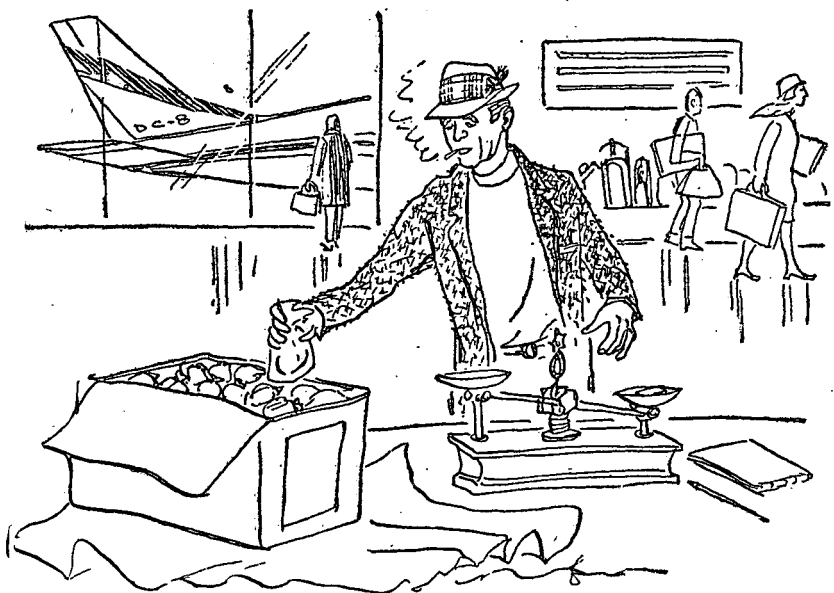
Retirement changed this state of affairs only for the worse. His mind was too young and restless to let him retire in any true sense of the word. He was lost without endless activity and twenty-six hour days. An assistant professorship in criminology at City College gave him a base and a salary. He also had full faculty status, use of

WHEN the Federal men busted Teddy Mink at the airport he was too shocked to talk. By the time they put him in a holding cell at city jail he'd thought it over. He still wasn't talking. Then somebody with a rifle on the roof of

the labs—and Polly McGrath. Polly was the world's most beautiful part-time secretary, a criminology major, and a most enthusiastic volunteer Watson to Professor Meeger's Sherlock.

He thought of her as a daughter,

sor," but he got them only after everybody else was ready to give up. Instead of being in on the start of the problem and being able to run his usual, scientifically methodical, step-by-step investigation, he was brought in after the hounds



and she thought of him as a truly great man. It was fine for both of them.

Brain sharpening was the least of his worries. The wheels never topped turning long enough for he thought-machine to rust or lull.

He still got all the really tough cases in town dumped into his lap for "whatever advice you can give us, Inspector, uh, I mean Profes-

had trampled the trail and the criminal was far gone from the scene.

"I get all the messes, all the handicaps, and none of the fun anymore," he said, putting his office phone back in its cradle.

"Another doozy on the griddle?" asked Polly sympathetically.

"Yes, my dear," Meeger said meditatively. "I think doozy is just about the proper word for this one.

It appears to be the offspring of some gay indiscretion involving a fantasy and an outright impossibility."

"What is it this time, another locked door murder?" That was one of their standing jokes.

"Locked door, yes," he said. "No murder yet. But something's being taken through a door that's double-locked, bolted, sealed, guarded and watched. They can't even find out what it is, let alone how it's taken through."

Polly flipped open her stenographic notebook. "Tell me all." She'd adopted the habit of taking copious notes on all of his cases that she could observe directly or persuade him to discuss.

"That was Chief Haskins on the phone. The department's been called in this time by the Customs people at the airport—just informally, and as a favor, of course. They've got a smuggler. At least they think he's got to be a smuggler; has a record as long as my arm. Either that, or he's scrambled his brains completely. The trouble is, they can't nail him. They can't even find out for sure *what* he's smuggling. They need help."

"I guess they do," Polly said.

Meeger filled a briar pipe and lighted it with a kitchen match. "Indeed, yes," he agreed. "I'm not sure I'm the one to call on this

time. The whole thing sounds like complete lunacy to me. Still, it'll probably be interesting to try. Find our hats and let's away to the airport."

They were taken into the comfortable office of Chief Customs Inspector Callahan and given mugs of hot, fragrant coffee.

"It's a problem," Callahan said. "A real problem. For one thing, the man we're after is Theodore Mink. You know him?"

"Of course. I nailed him for a five-to-ten rap in forty-nine. The man's as slippery as his name, and a really addicted thief. Anything he mixes in has to be wrongo."

"Has he a reputation for being exceptionally clever, Inspector?"

"Teddy Mink clever? Good heavens, no. He's shrewd like most of his sort, but not really bright. His I.Q. would probably have to stand on a chair to make 85."

"That's what *we* thought," Callahan said. "Now we're beginning to wonder. He's obviously up to some hanky-panky or other, but we can't even figure out *what* it is, let alone begin to catch him at it. It's like a murder with no corpus delicti and no idea where to look for one."

"You going to give me some facts?" Meeger asked.

"We're not sure we have any," Callahan said. "Instead, we're go-

ng to let you see for yourself now."

He pulled back the curtains covering one wall of his office and exposed a one-way window. They could see out, but no one could see into the office.

They were looking down from the mezzanine into the depot where passengers claim their baggage from incoming planes. A moving conveyor belt brought the luggage from the unloading trucks and carried it around a circular ramp from which the owner could pick it up. Then he had to carry it to the counter where Customs made what was usually a rather perfunctory check.

"There's a plane in from South America any minute now," Callahan explained. "It's a daily flight. Mink meets it twice every week—every Tuesday and Thursday. There's always a package addressed to him and marked to be picked up on arrival. I want you to watch what happens after that."

"Here comes Teddy now," Polly said.

Mink came in from the walkway outside the room and joined a knot of passengers coming from the disembarkation ramp. A few minutes after the first of the baggage arrived on its conveyer belt.

Teddy was carrying a cheap tin suitcase, apparently empty, as he swung it easily in one hand.

Among the items on the conveyer was a large package, wrapped in brown paper, corded securely, and addressed to him. An airline attendant, one of several in the room, picked this up and brought it to Mink. At the same time he handed him a slip of paper.

"What's that?" Meeger asked.

"Just an insurance receipt," Callahan explained. "The package is always insured for one thousand dollars and can be signed for by addressee only."

Teddy took the receipt over to one of the counters placed along the wall for the convenience of passengers. He pulled out a pen, put the package on the counter, rested the receipt on its top, and signed. The attendant put the signed receipt back in his clipboard and left the package.

"Now watch this," Callahan said. "It never varies."

Mink pulled out a jackknife and proceeded to cut the cords around the package and strip off the paper wrappings to reveal an ordinary cardboard shipping carton. He cut the top of this open to show a number of small plastic bags piled one upon the other. Next, he opened the tin suitcase and took out a pair of old-fashioned balance scales, bronzed lead weights, and a small notebook. Each of the plastic bags went on the scales in turn.

Mink entered the weight in the notebook with his pen each time.

"What is that stuff?" Polly asked needlessly.

"Clay," Callahan exploded. "Wet clay. We've taken samples and run them through the lab. We've tested with chemicals and filters. There's nothing out of the ordinary in that clay—no diamonds, no capsules of dope, no grains of metallic ore, no poisons—nothing but wet clay."

"Your search has been thorough?" Meeger asked.

"Absolutely. The lab boys take it as a personal challenge. They've tried tests I'd never in the world have thought of. We've taken random samples. Twice we grabbed entire shipments and tested every single gram before giving it back to Mink a week later. He was surprisingly patient. Probably knew we wouldn't find anything. It's just clay—C.L.A.Y.—clay."

"He knows that better than you do," Meeger said.

"What do you mean by that, Inspector?"

"Professor," Meeger corrected him. "If the clay were anything but a sort of red herring, I'm sure your people would be onto it by now. There's a limit to what can be hidden in a small bag of wet clay, most of which aren't worth the trouble of smuggling. On top of that, if he were afraid, he would-

n't let you keep on grabbing the stuff to test. After the first time he could get a court order, you know."

"We thought of that, too, but it doesn't help us any."

"What about the wrappings?" Meeger said. "I suppose you've checked them out."

"Of course. He just leaves them on the floor where they fall. In spite of that, we pick that junk up every week and give it every known test, plus a few we invented just for this case. It's cut in shreds, treated with chemicals, put under ultraviolet light and electron microscopes. We even burn it and analyze the smoke."

"My," Polly said, "all that and nothing?"

"Nothing at all. We've searched that tin suitcase he brings in. We gave him back a duplicate and melted down the original. Nothing. We did the same to the scales after putting them under an X-ray. Had to pay an arm and a leg to replace them. Not one thing out of the way or even suspicious. We gave Mink a quick frisk as he came in as a routine measure. Once we took all his clothes on the way out, gave him a better outfit, and really worked over what he'd worn."

"Nothing?" Polly asked.

"Exactly nothing!" Callahan

said. "We even took all the paper identification and cash out of his wallet and let Intelligence work it over—the full treatment. No code, no secret inks, no microdots. Nothing."

"I wouldn't go quite that far," Meeger said mildly, "since the very absence of all the things you've checked for gives you the positive information that this isn't an ordinary case of smuggling. Couple that with the fact that Teddy Mink is deliberately attracting the attention of the authorities for the first time in a long and checkered career, and you narrow down the possibilities."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Well, look at it this way. All this business with wet clay and scales can *only* be intended to stir you up and get attention. Otherwise, he'd at least take his package away before opening it. What he's doing isn't natural for him. It's either very clever or very stupid. Teddy isn't either. I think he's following orders."

"Professor," Polly said with notebook poised, "just why would anyone issue such orders? It just isn't logical. I mean there must be some motivation."

Meeger nodded. "Of course there has to be a motive. The only thing is, I've got several possible ones

from which to choose. The solution depends on which is the right one."

At the counter below them Mink had stopped weighing bags of clay long enough to pull out a heavy, "bulldog" pipe and begin stuffing and tamping down the bowl with tobacco from an oilskin pouch. He lighted it then, puffed out clouds of blue smoke, and went back to weighing his little bags.

"That's funny," Meeger said. "I never knew Teddy smoked a pipe. Seems to me he was strictly a cigarette and cigar man."

"Well, he smokes *that* around here," Callahan said positively. "We've X-rayed that pipe and analyzed the tobacco. It's a cheap brand. Lots of chaff mixed in. I wouldn't want to smoke it myself. He carries cigarettes too, usually. One of the standard brands. I can look it up in the files, if you like."

"No, thanks," Meeger said. "I don't think I need to know that. The whole picture's beginning to shape up nicely now. I can begin to make a choice of motives and even a reasonable guess at the technique that's being used."

"I don't know how you do it," Callahan said. "Our people haven't come up with a thing. That's why we asked for you."

"Professor Meeger's a real brain," said Polly proudly. "The Dean of

Humanities calls him a true intellectual."

"Nonsense," Meeger said. "I've no secret system. It's just a matter of simple common sense and logic."

"Then why don't we see it for ourselves?" Polly asked.

"When I finish training you, my dear, you will. This case hinges on Mink's apparently illogical behavior pattern. First, I look for a logical frame of reference, a motive that calls for all this folderol. Mink wants to be searched, because he knows you won't find anything. As long as he gives you a free hand and lets you search, you'll finally reach a point where you have to give up and leave him alone. If that wasn't what he (or his intelligent bosses) wanted, he'd have been screaming about his civil rights long before this. We know that."

"I see," Callahan said, "After we give up, and only then, the clay stops being so innocent. *Then* it's safe to start smuggling in earnest."

"I don't think so," Meeger said. "That's what Mink and his backer probably want you to think. They know you're smart enough to spot-check the shipments again, and they also know it won't do any good."

"What *are* they doing, then—just pulling our leg?"

"Not at all. Whoever planned

this is a joker all right, but not for humor's own sweet sake. This is much too elaborate and serious to be any sort of practical joke. No, there are *two* other alternatives to check out first. One is that they really have a secret way of getting something tangible into the country right under your noses. It's not likely. You have smart men and all the most modern scientific equipment, and once alerted—as they've been careful to see that you are—you people would turn up the gimmick sooner or later."

"Then what?"

"There's another alternative, Polly. Suppose Mink really isn't receiving a thing except wet clay. Suppose he's not smuggling something into this country, but is sending something *out*. All this byplay, then, is just a red herring to pull you off the track. You don't really search him when he comes *in* here."

"All he gets on the way in is a quick frisk," Callahan admitted. "But that's silly. He doesn't *send* anything. He *gets* the package."

"Come along," Meeger said. "I'll try to show you."

The three of them went down to the mail room in the airport and Meeger asked for the mailbag going out on the plane that had brought in Mink's wet clay. Callahan's authority sufficed to have

it opened. Meeger shuffled through the contents till he found the insurance receipt Mink had signed for his package.

"He sends *this* out every time," he said. "Have your lab check it for microdots. You'll find them."

They did. The dots were filled with confidential information of value to any potentially hostile nation.

"It wasn't hard to figure, once I accepted the idea nothing was coming into the country," Meeger explained. "You convinced me of that. Mink wasn't just playing games, so it had to be something going *out*. The only thing that did was this insurance receipt form. It's a standard form so it was easy enough to have a pad of them printed up. Each time Mink came in he brought one, already filled out and "loaded" with microdots. Easy enough to get a small bit of paper past a routine search; maybe rolled up inside a cigarette, maybe some other way."

"We weren't looking for it," Callahan said.

"Of course you weren't. Then, when the man gave Mink the slip

to sign, he always went to the counter. That put his back to anyone watching, for long enough to switch the forms and sign his own."

"That could be done," Callahan said, "but, hang it, man, why didn't we find the original slip of paper? We searched him on the way out. We checked every bit of trash. We went over the floor and the counter practically with a microscope. We found *nothing*. How did he get rid of it?"

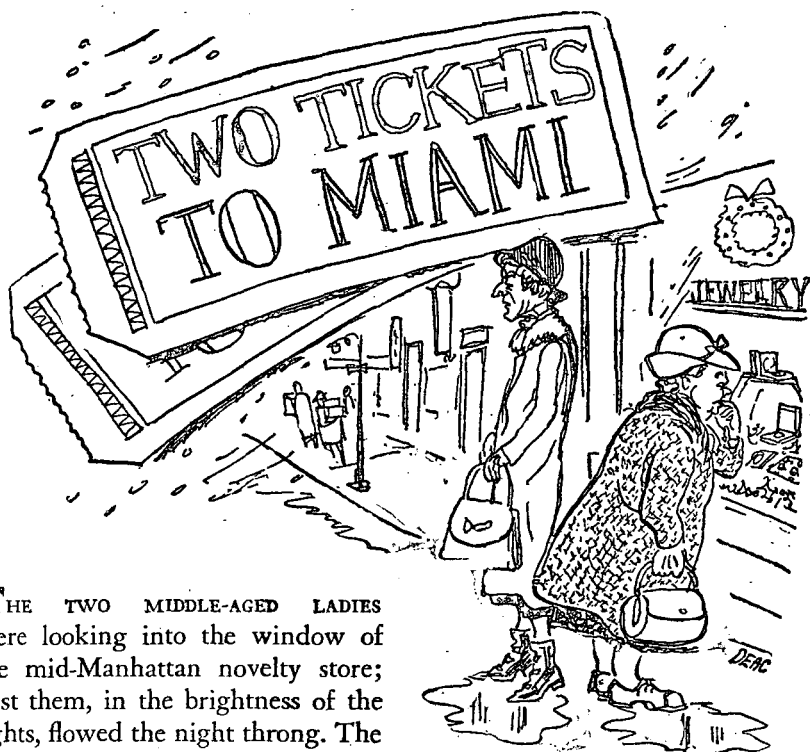
"Just the way he did today," Meeger said. "We sat there and watched him do it. It's a small piece of thin paper. He wadded it into a ball, covered it with tobacco, and smoked it in that big pipe of his. There wasn't any other reason for Teddy Mink to smoke a pipe. That was the thing that really gave the whole caper away. I began to wonder what the pipe had to do with this and the answer fitted in with what I'd already guessed."

"Professor," Polly said, "you really are a brain."

"Common sense," Meeger said. "Just common, garden variety common sense."



Everyone is aware, of course, that the autonomous organization of a system outweighs by far its individual components.



THE TWO MIDDLE-AGED LADIES were looking into the window of the mid-Manhattan novelty store; past them, in the brightness of the lights, flowed the night throng. The taller lady, who was lank, with flaring nostrils and a fine filigree of wrinkles, said, "This is junk, Buckley. Come on."

Buckley kept staring into the window, chewing her gum, jaws moving slowly and inexorably. She was shorter and husky, with

a pink, smooth complexion and wide blue eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses. She wore men's shoes; they were more comfortable. "Look at that brooch, Jannsen. Look at the price those robbers got on that brooch."

"Come on, Buckley. We got tickets to buy."

"Damn robbers," Buckley growled, not budging, staring at the brooch, chewing truculently.

"Nobody's forcing you to buy it, Buckley. Come on."

"Fourteen ninety-five," Buckley said. "What a nerve! It ain't worth five dollars."

"Are you coming, Buckley, or are you not?"

"They won't take *me*."

"I'm going, Buckley," Jannsen said.

Buckley let out a squawk. "Look what they're asking for that bracelet!"

Jannsen walked away, joining the crowd, but moving slowly enough for Buckley to catch up. After a while Buckley bellowed in a voice that overpowered the street noise, "*Hèy, Jannsen, wait!*"

By
Michael
Zuroy

Heads turned, hundreds of eyes stared. Jannsen's back grew rigid as she walked on. Buckley stomped after her, roaring, "*Wait up, Jannsen!*"

"Close your big mouth," Jannsen said when Buckley had overhauled

her. "It flaps like your feet."

"What?" Buckley stared at her companion, sincerely puzzled.

"You embarrass me, shouting in public that way, like a truck driver."

"Then what did you walk away for?"

Jannsen's nostrils flared. She said nothing.

"Jannsen, you're an idiot," Buckley said.

"You're a savage."

"Old crow."

"Clown."

"The hell with the tickets," Buckley said.

"Very well," Jannsen said. "I agree. The hell with them."

"The hell with the bus trip to Miami together."

"The hell with that certainly."

"The hell with opening up a rooming house together in Miami."

"Absolutely the hell with that."

"No more partners," Buckley growled.

"No more," Jannsen said loftily. "I am through."

Suddenly, a man crossed Jannsen's line of sight. For her, the quarrel faded. Something about this man reminded her of her dream-husband—as he'd looked before the murder. The way he'd looked afterwards, well, she tried to keep that out of her mind. This man had the same type of bold

features and big potbelly that Barney'd had.

Sure. It took a man to carry a potbelly like Barney's, to eat and drink like Barney. Everything about Barney had been big, hands, feet, voice; big, bald head.

She remembered when she'd first seen him. She'd been running this rooming house for some years in a resort area, near the South Shore beaches. A maiden lady in her late forties, alone in the world, this was her means of support. Better than traveling to an office, she'd felt; at least she need not leave the dignity and security of her home. Perhaps it was partly because of this retiring nature that she'd never married, but she knew that it was also because of her fear of men and her prim, dry lankiness. She'd long since stopped crying the nights away about this; there had remained only periods of sadness and a vague, wistful hankering. Among her roomers, there had been many men, but never any real, personal contact. Her prison was man-proof, and more so with the advancing years.

Then Barney Willard had moved in.

He'd overwhelmed her at sight. Other men seemed faded compared to him, with that big bald head, great, unabashed voice, and big, warm smile that had beamed into

her at once, as no smile had ever done, melting the ice around her heart.

"It's a nice room," he'd said. "I'll take it."



"Very well," she'd said, in her habitually stiff way, but thinking, *This man should have been my husband. How odd to know so surely with a stranger.* Of course it was too late. She knew that, too.

She wanted to know things about him, and she set out to learn. He was unmarried; he'd dropped that fact early. He'd said he was a salesman, but he didn't seem to have a job, never went far from the house, day or night; to the boardwalk sometimes, or to the beach where he'd tan his bulk, covered with manly hair, and splash in the breakers, or to a restaurant, or for a short stroll in the business district. He had a big, expensive car which he hardly moved from her parking area. He seemed to have plenty of

money; his wallet was always thick with bills.

Presently, she began to get the impression that he was in hiding.

She stored every speck of information and meaning in his talk as a mouse stores grain, matched them into conclusions. No detective would have been sharper. She found a gambling flavor in him and indications that he'd been in the gambling rackets. Curiously, this did not bother her. If her man—even if he was so only in dream—was a racketeer, well, that was his work, and a woman had to stand by her man. If he needed to hide now, from the police, or perhaps from other mobsters—she hadn't yet discovered which—she'd welcome the opportunity to help. In fact, it was her luck that this had brought him here.

Since he stayed close to the rooming house, she saw him often. The other roomers were season people or transients. With them she maintained an ordinary politeness, but Barney she often invited for tea or coffee in her little apartment on the ground floor rear of the huge Victorian house. Sometimes they sat out on her private walled terrace, which opened from the apartment, restfully drinking and eating the little delicacies she liked to make, chatting or looking out in long, companionable silences at the close

waters of the bay, which here curved in back of the ocean, and at the green-brown seaweed and riffling reeds of the swamp between bay-shore and house grounds.

They were an odd combination, the mobster and prim spinster landlady, but in a way, not so odd; she had not been wrong; primarily, they were suited, and he seemed to find as much pleasure in her company. Under different circumstances they might have been a proper businessman and his wife, or—in a different era—a feudal lord and his lady.

Barney was sometimes jovial and bantering with her, but always a gentleman, never making any passes.

One night, though, right out on the porch, having come home with a beery breath, he seized her and squeezed her to him in a swash-buckling hug. "There, now," he'd said, "what do you think of that, Miss Jannsen?"

She'd felt herself melting, fainting, her breath catching, her pulse going wild through her whole body. She wanted to clutch him and dig her nails into his flesh. She wanted him to attack her without mercy, she wanted all of his strength. She said, "I think you're forgetting yourself, Mr. Willard." The pattern of a lifetime would not dissolve in a moment.

"I guess I am, Miss Jannsen," he said, and released her.

He never did that again, but afterward she began to let her dreams go all the way. Before he'd touched her, she'd made her thoughts stop at just his being her man. Now, she wanted it all.

When had they met? She dreamed a better time, a better place. She was nineteen. There were people, music, gaiety. Yes, a dance; a mad, happy whirl, for her. The young men were rushing her, beautiful, charming, tantalizing creature that she was. She'd been dancing with one, a dashing devil with a mustache, when . . . across the room . . . she'd seen *him*. He was standing in the doorway, having come late. He was tall, burly, powerful, and every other man in the room seemed to shrink and pale in her view. He was staring at her with stricken, awed, burning eyes.

For an infinite moment, their glances were chained, then he strode through the crowd directly to her. "My dance now," he told her partner.

"No, you don't," the other young man said, angrily. "Took me long enough to get her. Move on."

Barney had simply lifted the other man right off the floor and set him aside, as though he were a child.

Then he'd taken her into his

arms; taken possession of his prize.

How often she relived that first time, the sweetness of that first dance, the floating, the breathless happiness, the exciting security of his embrace, the talk that came without effort, as natural as though they'd always known each other, the understanding, the way he'd skillfully steered her through the crowd and out to a secluded spot in the garden, where, amidst the fragrance of jasmine and honeysuckle, he'd kissed her hard and urgently and where in a flash of spirit she'd slapped his face and he'd laughed at her and kissed her again and her arms had twined around him and they'd sunk down upon a white, wrought-iron, curling bench, mouth to mouth and breast to breast and heart to heart . . .

Ah, the madness!

There were the beautiful days of courtship to dream about, the shows, the little out-of-the-way restaurant they'd discovered, the long, exploring walks through city streets, the hot chocolate on a winter's night and then the nestling in each other's arms while the snow drifted down outside, the rides in the country, parking in a leafy retreat, lazy ripples around their canoe in the moonlight, running in the rain, laughing, hand in hand . . .

The day they'd been married, an

especially fond dream . . . The pure white bridal gown, the vows before all, his worshipping, promising eyes, the final sweet deed of the ring, from him to her, the kiss—the marriage kiss.

Yes, she'd been afraid the first night, but he'd given her no time for fear. He'd told her that he loved her and then raised in her such storm and fever that she could think of little else; a man of large passions, her Barney, and who else could have released her?

She felt a need to share these dreams with someone, and there was only one person in the world with whom she was that close; her friend of many years, Buckley.

Buckley was a maiden lady, too, and also ran a rooming house, nearby.

Buckley understood when she talked on about Barney and how it might have been. She understood well, because one day, as they were sitting on a boardwalk bench, looking out at the sparkling ocean, Buckley heaved a sigh and said, "Yeah, I know. There's a guy staying at my place I been thinking about, too."

"Oh? What's he like?"

"He ain't much. A runty red-head. Sharp, with a line of talk. Don't know what there is about him, but it's like you say, Jannsen, there's a feeling we could of made

the trip together. I mean, I can picture this runt around the house all the time, belonging to me. I mean, a rough cow like me most men don't want, so I never married, but with this runt it could of worked."

"What does he do?"

"He's a kind of free-lance photographer. Goes door to door, canvassing kids' pictures, has them developed somewhere. He seems to make a pretty fair buck. Wish we'd met when we was young. Why couldn't it have been, suppose, that I was home alone one day and he was ringing doorbells and he rung my bell and I opened the door and we clicked, like a camera, him seeing this hefty armful of gal and me this nervy runt, cute like a charm on a bracelet, and he says, "Can I



come in and take your picture?" and I says, "Certainly," and he comes in and starts posing me and our hands touch and we get electric shocks and fall into a tangle and

we go on from there developing a lifetime romance? Why couldn't it just as easy have been like that?"

"It could have," Jannsen said, thinking again of how it might have been with Barney. Barney could have been, say, a civil engineer, a builder of bridges and roads and tunnels instead of a gambler, and after they were married she might have gone with him to South America, Brazil, or perhaps Ecuador, and drifted on the Amazon while guitars tinkled, and seen the Iguassu Falls and climbed the Pico da Bandeira and had native servants and watched him in wide hat and boots, a chief among men, blazing roads across the wilderness of the Galapagos Islands where they could have faced each other across candlelight and hot turtle soup at night . . .

Like schoolgirls, Jannsen and Buckley drew their private dreams and when they were together sighed and giggled over them, supporting each other, until it seemed pointless to identify them as dreams and sweeter to treat them, for the moment, as fact.

"After we returned from South America," Jannsen told Buckley, "we decided it was time to settle down in the States and raise a family. Barney had put together some very nice capital, so he went into the construction business. He did

very well. We became actually wealthy. It was at this time that my first, Donald, was born. Two years later, Sheila came along, then Stephen. We lived at our estate on the Island when we were not traveling in Europe or vacationing. Barney insisted on the best of everything, especially for the children, though at the same time they had to learn their responsibilities . . ."

"After we were married," Buckley told Jannsen, "Harry took me out to the West Coast where he went into movie photography. He was a natural and it wasn't long before he was pulling down a wad. But he wouldn't stop there, not Harry Strock, no sir. He got together with two other talented guys and they formed their own movie company. First picture they produced was a smash. We were made. He built me a magnificent joint in Bel Air. That's when the twins were born. They were a handful; I decided not to have any more children after that. One thing I'll say about Harry—with all the beautiful chicks he could have had, he never looked twice at another woman . . ."

"Now that the children are grown and Donald and Sheila are married and Stephen is away at school," Jannsen told Buckley, "Barney and I have decided that we don't need the estate. I think I'd

just like to have a small, cozy place where we can relax and be together . . .”

“I’ll tell you it was no cinch seeing the twins safely married,” Buckley told Jannsen. “They were a wild pair. But that’s done and now me and Harry want to do some traveling . . .”

One night, as Jannsen was preparing coffee for Barney in her apartment, feeling content and secure with her dream-husband, he said with total casualness, “Well, Miss Jannsen, it’s been nice, but I’ll be moving out next week. Is a week’s notice okay?”

She felt a sickness yawn open in her body. Carefully, she put the percolator down on the stove and turned on the flame. She looked through the kitchen door at Barney’s big frame on the sofa in her livingroom. “It’s perfectly all right, Mr. Willard,” she said steadily. “Where are you going?”

“Back to Chicago,” he said. “Had a little trouble there, but it’s all adjusted now.”

“You won’t be coming back here?”

“Guess not,” he said.

She’d never see him again, she thought wildly. Never. His underworld life would claim him again, his real life. He’d go back to excitement and extravagance and never waste a thought on her. He’d have

women. Oh, yes. There would be plenty of wicked women for a man like Barney. *They* would have him. Not she.

Her dreams would turn into miserable lies. They were all right while she had him here safely in her home like her own real husband, but they’d be nothing when she lost him. All would be ashes, her way would be forever barren and desolate.

She must not let him escape.

Must not, she thought as she worked, preparing the snacks. *Must not. Would not. There was a way. Only one. Now, tonight, before she lost courage.*

It need not be difficult. The means were common enough in any household. She opened her cleaning materials closet and examined the contents: drain solvent, lye, laundry bleach, paint remover. Any of these would do it and in hot coffee might not be detected until too late; Barney had a habit of gulping his first cup of coffee. *Painful, though, poor darling.* What was in the medicine cabinet? Iodine, just as bad.

Oh, of course, she should have thought of it at once. There was this rat poison she’d bought for the marsh rats that sometimes crept up to the house. Certainly if a rat couldn’t detect it, a human wouldn’t. It might not be too bad

for Barney, better than lye at least . . .

The powder dissolved well. Barney gulped his coffee without hesitation and reached for one of her plump, homemade doughnuts while she watched him from across the table. He finished the doughnut. He smiled and opened his mouth to say something and his mouth formed a grimace instead. A gagging, retching sound came from his throat and quickly she turned on the radio so that the other roomers wouldn't hear. He fell to the floor, doubling up, twisting and arcing, and for a horrible moment his agonized, conscious, accusing eyes met hers and she ran into the other room and closed the door. *Poor Barney.* She just couldn't stand this. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. "But now no one else can have you."

Presently, she went back in and looked down at his contorted body and great bald head and opened mouth that showed the gold in his teeth. She looked away quickly. This was not the way she wanted to remember him.

After midnight, with the hulking house asleep and silent, she dragged the body through her private terrace, through the blackness and across the grounds to the edge of the swamp. She returned and

took back a garden spade and dug a deep hole. This swampy land was easy to dig and it was richly organic—everybody admired her tomatoes. The body would soon return to the earth. When the body was buried, she returned to the house.

Before daylight, she drove his car away. Later that day she left it in a wood outside a small Pennsylvania town, stripping it of plates and all identifying papers. By evening, she had arrived back home by bus. During the week, she disposed of his private effects by putting them out in separate parcels with the garbage; the collectors whisked them away forever.

She let the other roomers know that Mr. Willard had left, and felt quite safe. Barney had come from nowhere and disappeared to nowhere, as roomers sometimes did. There was no one to care.

Her nights were lonely and sad now, so romantically sad. Her beloved husband, her dream-husband, had passed away. Some nights she sat at her table looking into candle-flame, seeing his face in the flame, with its warm smile and the special look he had for her. She relived the tender moments they'd had together, the troubles they'd faced together, the dangers. She remembered with admiration how Barney, armed with nothing more

than a horsewhip, had put to flight those knife-carrying bandits in Ecuador . . . Some nights, when the moon was out, looking out across the swamp, she felt that she saw his spirit, walking in the marsh, drifting across the rushes, yearning, yearning for her, calling with the wind, "E-d-n-a . . . E-d-n-a-a . . ."

She and Buckley still talked in the same way, although Buckley was too self-absorbed to notice her new melancholy and that now she always spoke of Barney in the past tense. Then one day, Buckley appeared with a gloomy, despairing face. "He's leaving me," she told Jannsen hopelessly. "Harry's leaving. Says this territory's played out, he's got to move on. I can't change his mind. What'll I do? What'll I do, Jannsen?"

"I had the same problem," Jannsen said. "Until Barney passed away."

"Barney passed away? I didn't know Barney passed away. Are you talking for real?"

"For real," Jannsen said. "Barney passed away."

Their eyes met and held for long moments; then they looked out over the ocean. "I ain't saying it didn't occur to me," Buckley said. "It's better that way, ain't it?"

"Much better," Jannsen said. "Take my word. But Barney suf-

fered. That was wrong. They shouldn't suffer."

"I wouldn't want Harry to suffer."

"It should be fast. Out like a match."

"That's the way I want my Harry to go," Buckley said. "But how?"

Jannsen sighed. "I see that you need help," she said.

Jannsen knew her way about the Island; she had no difficulty in renting a small fishing launch for the day. She picked up Buckley and Harry Strock at the appointed North Shore cove and soon they were out on the Sound, floating on a calm sea under a sparkling blue sky, the land soft and hazy in the distance.

"I sure appreciate this last chance at some fishing, Miss Jannsen," Harry said, watching the line trailing from his rod.

"Don't mention it," Jannsen said. "I know how it is—I'm an old fisherwoman myself. I had the boat, anyhow, and I'm glad to have company."

"Beautiful day for it," Harry said.

"Beautiful." Jannsen looked at Buckley, who was behind Harry. No other craft was in sight; as good a time as any. Jannsen nodded at her friend, and Buckley picked up a length of iron pipe from under the seat and struck with all her strength at the back of

Harry's head—but Harry had moved; the blow turned into a glancing one.

Harry squawked, dropped his rod and turned dazedly, holding his head. Buckley struck again and missed, hitting his shoulder. Jannsen picked up her own iron pipe and swung, but Harry managed to dodge that one. "Hey!" he sputtered. "Have you dames gone crazy? Cut it out. Lemme be, now. Cut it out!"

They converged on him, swinging. He wrenched Buckley's pipe away. Instantly, she seized him by the throat while Jannsen knocked the pipe out of his hand. They went to the bottom of the boat struggling, Buckley throttling him, Jannsen striking. His body flopped and strained.

"Hold still, lover boy, damn you," Buckley begged. "If you'll only hold still it will be over in a minute. You're just making it worse this way."

Finally, his body was still.

Jannsen had the rocks and the window-chain in the locker. They filled the metal picnic hamper with rocks, chained it securely to his body and threw him over. He sank swiftly, with one last gurgle.

On the way back, Buckley kept looking out over the sea, crying.

"Yes, cry it out, Buckley," Jannsen said. "I know how it feels.

Now, I'll tell you what I did about Barney's car and his possessions . . ."

"Jannsen!" Buckley said, as they walked through the New York night throng. "Say something! Now you're acting like a zombie."

"I was thinking about Barney."

"Oh," Buckley said, her face changing, thinking about Harry. They walked on in silence.

"We shouldn't fight, Jannsen," Buckley said.

"No, we shouldn't quarrel. After all, who do we have in the world but each other?"

"That's right," Buckley said. "It's a good idea to move to a warmer climate, but it's better together."

"Yes, indeed," Jannsen said. "There's nothing to keep us here any longer. The children have their own lives now."

Buckley nodded. "Yes, the twins don't need their old mother anymore."

"That's the way it is," Jannsen said. "So we shouldn't quarrel."

"No, we shouldn't," Buckley said. "Not two lonely widows like us."

"At least we have our memories," Jannsen said.

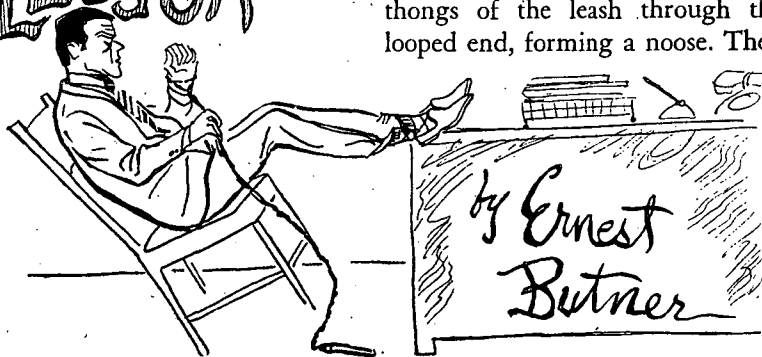
They turned into the bus depot. At the ticket counter, Jannsen said firmly to the clerk, "We're interested in two tickets to Miami."

Lessons learned in small doses are not soon forgotten.



DEADLY

LESSON



THE JAIL cell was opened late in the day and Benny Kusek ushered downstairs. He again faced the detective who'd brought him in shortly after discovery of the body on the campus.

"Got news for you, Benny," he said, sounding disappointed. "I just got the leash back from the lab and you're no longer my prime murder suspect."

Benny saw the leash and grunt-

ed. A little-boy grin crossed his face as he reached out eagerly for it, but his extended hand went unnoticed.

The detective sat reared back in his chair, legs crossed, heels resting on the edge of the desk top. Frowning, he threaded the interwoven thongs of the leash through the looped end, forming a noose. Then

he raised his left forearm and dropped the small noose over his clenched fist, tightening it just above his watchband.

"See there, Benny?" he said. "That's how it was done. That's how she was killed."

Even Benny Kusek understood. He watched the simple demonstration closely, knowing that the big fist of the detective was supposed to be the girl's head and the tightly

encircled wrist her neck. He stood there, staring down, fascinated, and tried to imagine the life being slowly squeezed out of her.

"That's how I thought *you* did it. But the lab report turned out negative. Know what that means?" He looked at Benny a long moment, then wagged his head sadly. "But you wouldn't know. Of course you wouldn't. Well, it means I can't hold you any longer. I'm letting you go."

"Back to Patsy?"

"Oh, yes—your dog. Sure. I'll take you back to her." He loosened the leash and slid it from his arm. Rubbing his wrist, he sighed. "An attractive young coed. She wasn't molested, wasn't robbed. It doesn't make sense, Benny. But you never strangled her. I'm satisfied of that now. I was all wrong in expecting the microscope to reveal a particle of her flesh or strand of her hair on your leash, wasn't I?"

Benny nodded. Once more he reached down for the leash. This time it was returned to him.

"Like you said—you were only walking your dog on the college grounds last night." Swinging his legs from the desk top, the detective let his feet drop to the floor heavily. "Let's go."

Following him out to the car parked in front of the police station, Benny knew that he'd be driv-

en back to Mrs. Bailey's. She was his guardian. She let him stay in the tiny garage apartment behind her big house on the corner, across the street from the campus.

Mrs. Bailey was a widow and rented the upstairs rooms to college girls. She needed Benny for cutting the grass and trimming the hedge. Sometimes she made him wash the windows or move the heavy furniture around inside.

As the police car pulled over to the curb, Mrs. Bailey rose from her porch rocker. She came down the steps, frowning. Benny got out quickly and left her talking with the homicide officer.

Patsy barked a loud greeting as he pushed open the gate at the side of the house. She was part terrier, very playful at times, and cut sharply past him as she dashed about the yard.

He sank down on the cool grass to play with her. Patsy was all he had since they'd taken his mother off to the cemetery. He wished she'd rise up and come back to do all the hard work for Mrs. Bailey like she used to do.

It was nearly dark when Mrs. Bailey called from the back door. "Come into the house," she said. "I've warmed some soup for you."

Patsy followed him inside and curled up on the linoleum under the kitchen table as he sat down.

After a few minutes Mrs. Bailey left the room. Benny sucked the soup into his mouth loudly. Then he put the spoon down, picked up the bowl and licked it clean with his tongue.

A sharp intake of breath made him turn his head. It was one of the girls who lived upstairs. She'd started into the room, halted abruptly at sight of him. Turning sharply, she fled through the hallway, almost bumping into Mrs. Bailey.

"Now, now," the elderly woman said. "Try to calm yourself, my dear. The police have cleared him. They're quite convinced he had nothing to do with the murder."

Her arm went around the girl's waist, guiding her back into the kitchen. Opening the refrigerator, she took out the water bottle, and filled a glass. "This what you wanted?"

The girl nodded. She sipped it slowly. Her eyes kept wandering toward Benny, as though she expected him to spring up at her any moment.

"You can't feel safe anymore with him around, can you, Janie?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Even if he's innocent—if he's harmless—you wonder for how long, don't you?"

"I—I can't help it after—"

"Of course not." A deep sigh es-

caped Mrs. Bailey. "Well, it may put your mind at ease to know I've already arranged to commit him to the state hospital. Tonight. I just got off the phone, Janie, so you run along upstairs and tell your roommate and the others. I simply won't have my lovely girls frightened off."

As Janie stepped from the room, Mrs. Bailey took the soup bowl from the table. "We're taking a short trip, Benny. I think you'll like your new home."

"Me and Patsy."

"Just you."

A while later, when she noticed him leaning down to attach the leash to the dog's collar, she said, "No, no. Patsy is staying here."

Benny rose and trudged behind Mrs. Bailey. She held the gate back for him, and Patsy was left whimpering in the darkness on the other side of the fence. She swung the garage doors aside, and tossed the small suitcase she'd packed for him onto the rear seat of the car.

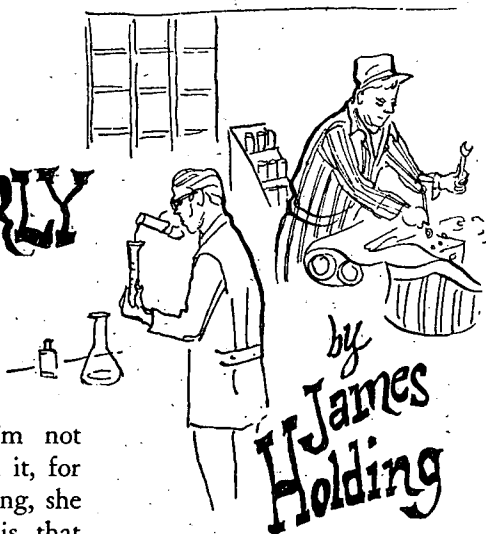
"No, Benny." She almost laughed. "On the other side. You get in on the other side. You don't think I'd let you dr—"

Sometimes Benny had trouble remembering, but the trick the detective had shown him was easy. Slipping the leash from around Mrs. Bailey's neck afterwards, he went back to Patsy.

*The great Scot expressed it thus:
Affliction's sons are brothers in distress;
A brother to relieve,—how exquisite the bliss!*



A CASE OF BROTHERLY Love



by
**James
Holding**

DON'T GET ME WRONG. I'm not sorry I killed her; far from it, for if anybody ever had it coming, she did. All I'm sorry about is that the wrong guy had to take the rap for it and, after it happened, that there wasn't a thing in the world I could do about it. Even a full confession on my part wouldn't have helped him any.

I remember it was a Tuesday when it started, because it was the day after Labor Day and my first wedding anniversary. I left the drugstore half an hour early so I could stop at the florist's on the way home and get some flowers

for Vicki. It turned out that was more time than I needed. I saw some long-stemmed red roses right away that seemed just the thing for a first anniversary bouquet, so I bought them and headed home for dinner. I was looking forward to my ration of one martini and an hour with Vicki before I had to get back to the pharmacy for my evening trick behind the prescription counter. The store stays

open for business till ten o'clock.

I live only a few minutes' walk from downtown but that afternoon I stepped out as lively as though I had to cover five miles instead of five blocks before I could get that drink and a kiss from Vicki. I suppose the weather had something to do with the way I felt, too. It was a clear, chilly afternoon, just turning dark, and to take a gulp of the air you'd never know that the science boys claimed it was full of pollution. It smelled and tasted and breathed pretty good to me after being cooped up all day in the medicine-and-malted-milk atmosphere of the drugstore.

On the way home, I passed a couple of guys I know. They said hello, and one of them pretended not to see the paper-wrapped bouquet in my hand and laughed and said, "What you looking so happy about, Jim? Somebody leave you a million bucks?"

I said, "I didn't know it showed, Sam. It was two million, matter of fact."

"I always wanted to be acquainted with a rich man," the other one, Gabe, said. "Can you lend me, say, fifty thousand till pay day, Jim?"

I waved the bouquet at them and went on toward home, thinking that if they had a wife like Vicki, they'd look happy, too.

Sam's wife was a hairdresser whose own hair you couldn't tell from the stuffing out of a hay mattress, and Gabe's wife, Hannah, was a real dog as wives go—never without a can of beer in her hand and another on the table ready to be opened when the first one ran dry.

With Vicki and me, it was like a stroke of lightning when we first met each other, and neither one of us had the guts to fight it for more than a month before we just gave in and decided the hell with everything else, we had to get married. That wasn't easy, because I was new in town and only on trial at the Village Pharmacy, and Vicki's husband, George, didn't go for the idea of a divorce at first, especially with me in the picture, and he turned pretty nasty before everything was settled.

In the end, we made it all right. That was just a year ago now, and I hadn't had an unhappy day since that I could remember. I felt bad about George, though, because he probably hadn't had a *happy* one since Vicki left him. George was hitting the bottle pretty hard, that's what I heard, but I didn't know whether it was true or not. One thing I did know: he hadn't so much as said hello to me since, or even let on he knew I was still alive; or Vicki, either.

By the time I got home, the

lights were on and it was almost dark. I turned in at the front gate—that Vicki always said reminded her of *Smilin' Through*, some old song she liked. Instead of going right to the front door and letting myself in with my key, as usual, I got this impulse to step off the front walk onto the grass and walk over and look in the living-room window through the slit where the drapes didn't quite meet. I figured I might see where Vicki was and whether I could maybe surprise her with the roses. She ought to be downstairs now, getting dinner ready, probably in the kitchen. If she was, I'd go around to the back door and knock, and when she came to answer it, I'd say, "Package for Mrs. Roberts," and hand her the roses. You know the kind of thing, kid stuff, but people do it.

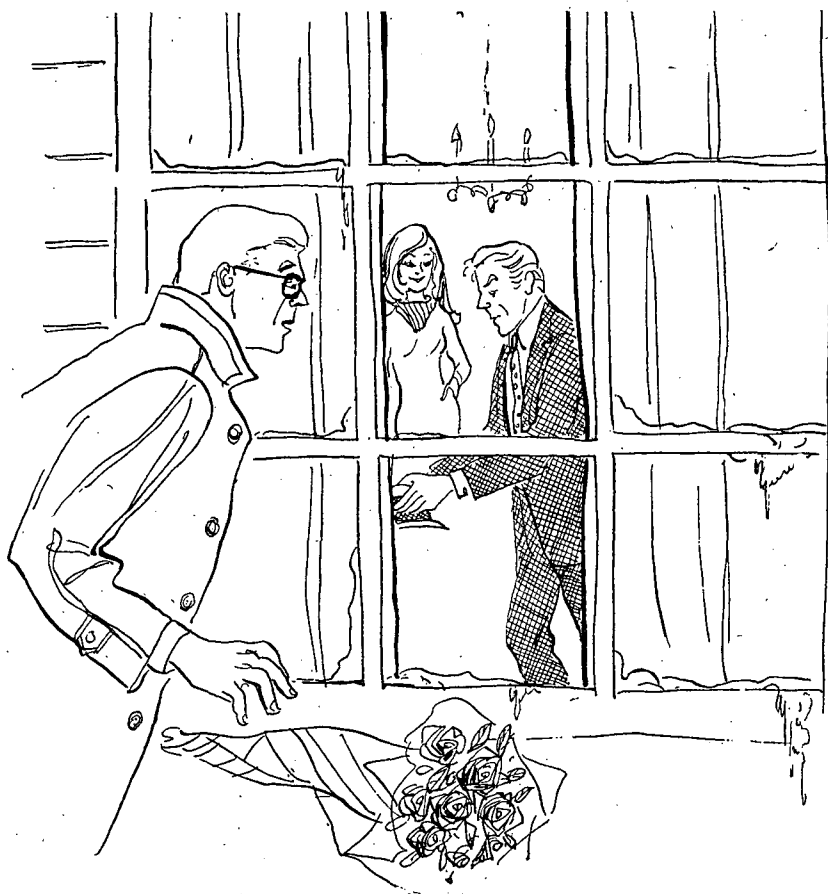
I looked through the crack between the drapes, and she wasn't in the kitchen. She was in the livingroom, standing beside my easy chair under the light, and the sight of her put a fist inside my chest that grabbed my heart and squeezed it hard. I wondered if I was going to black out, that's how bad off I was.

Vicki wasn't alone. All I could see of her was two arms, two hands, and a little bit of the red hair above her forehead. Every-

thing else was hidden by the big guy she was kissing. He had his back to me, and he had on a light gray suit, and he was big. That's all I noticed about him at first. I couldn't seem to believe that those were Vicki's arms hugging him to her and Vicki's hands spread out against those gray shoulders—but they were. They had to be, because I could recognize the wide wedding band on Vicki's left hand.

If you've ever happened to be slugged by a blackjack, you know how I felt: numb, stupid, aching all over and with a churning in my gut. I guess shock was my main trouble. Automatically, I looked at my watch and saw I was twenty minutes ahead of my regular homecoming time. When I pulled up my arm to look at my wristwatch, I saw I was still holding the bunch of red roses for Vicki. That's when it really hit me, but even then, I wasn't getting the whole message.

I dropped the roses on the ground under the window and took another look between the drapes. They were coming up for air in there now. Vicki said something I couldn't hear and laughed and tried to hold the man close to her, but he said something, too, and stepped back and didn't laugh. When he turned around to reach for his hat on the sofa, I saw who



he was: my very own brother, Eric!

I walked in the door of the auto repair shop. George pulled his head out of an engine he was working on and stared at me. "What the hell do *you* want?"

Well, that was something, anyway. They were the first words he'd spoken to me since Vicki left

him. I said, "I want to talk to you a minute, George."

"Drop dead," George said. "Why should I talk to you, wife-stealer?"

The kid mechanic working on the other side of the engine heard that.

I didn't like it, but I tried again. "I've got to talk to you. It's important. I need your advice."

George wiped his hands on a wad of waste and lit a cigarette. I noticed his hands were shaking a little, and his eyes looked kind of wild. I figured maybe it was true George was drinking a lot and his hangover was still with him from last night. Either that, or he was so burned at me that he couldn't keep his hands still. Anyway, I said, "Let's go in your office, okay? This is confidential." I jerked my head toward the kid mechanic.

George gave me a look as cold as a clam-digger's feet, and led the way to his office, a partitioned-off cubbyhole at one end of the repair shop. He sat down in the only chair in the place.

After I shut the office door, I hung a leg over a corner of his desk and said, "This is as tough for me as it is for you. But I've got to talk it out with somebody."

His voice was like a file on rusty metal. "Why me, wife-stealer?"

"Because you're my brother."

"That's no reason. I stopped being any relative of yours a year ago."

I paid no attention to that. I said, "And because this is about Vicki, George."

"Never heard of her."

"Then did you ever hear of your brother, Eric? It's about him, too."

That got to him. Eric had always been the best of the three

of us, the youngest and the best. George and I had hand-raised him after our parents were killed in an auto smashup. We saw him through high school, college and graduate school. We paid all his expenses outside of the scholarship funds he won. It took some doing for George and me to get up the scratch for Eric's education, because neither of us had much to go and come on ourselves at the time. George was just getting his auto repair shop off the ground, and I was working days as a counterman in a Pittsburgh drugstore so I could go to the School of Pharmacy at night. Between the two of us, though, we handled it. When Eric came home and landed an important job with our local computer company at a big salary, George and I were as proud of our kid brother as a couple of dotting maiden aunts. That was before I came back to town to take the Village Pharmacy job, though . . . and George's wife as well. George and I still saw Eric, of course, but separately. George wouldn't have been caught dead within a mile of Vicki or me this last year, even for Eric's sake.

Anyway, when I mentioned Eric, it caught George on his soft spot, just like I knew it would. He took a drag on his cigarette and said, "What about Eric?"

"He's in deep trouble. So am I."

"I don't give a damn about you. What about Eric?"

"He figures it's his turn with Vicki now," I said.

I couldn't keep from showing how bad I felt about it, I guess, for George surprised me. He laughed, out loud and for a long time.

"Well, well," he said finally, "how about that? I don't know much, but I sure as hell know enough to recognize poetic justice when it walks up and bites my brother Jim!"

"Stop clowning," I said, "and try to get it through your head that this is serious. I don't give any more of a damn about myself right now than you do . . ."

"Or about Vicki, either, I suppose?"

"I didn't say that. I still give a damn about Vicki, alley cat or not, and so do you, so don't hand me any clever dialogue on that subject."

George couldn't stop laughing, but it wasn't the way you laugh when you're having fun. "I'm beginning to think Vicki is a simple and uncomplicated woman, Jim. She just likes to change her husband once a year without changing her name."

"You didn't laugh so hard when she did it to you," I said.

"That's because I didn't realize until now that *she* did it. I thought all along it was you, Jim. But if Eric's going the same route with her now, it's got to be her fault. It looks like the Roberts brothers just somehow got mixed up with a real old-fashioned siren, doesn't it?"

I didn't say anything.

He went on, "And that makes it all the funnier, don't you see that? Because then it's *my* fault, the whole bit, for marrying her in the first place."

I said, "Stop with the jokes, and think about Eric for a minute, will you?"

George sobered down. "I'm thinking, damn you, Jim."

"Good. Because if Vicki gets her hooks into Eric, she's going to louse up his life just the way she's loused up yours. And mine."

"If she gets her hooks into him? I thought you said she had."

"She's working on it. But I don't think she's quite made the grade yet."

"Then what the hell are you here for? She's your wife. Stop her."

"It's not that easy," I said. "Remember?"

He remembered, all right, and so did I—all the threats and black anger and jealous arguing that had got us absolutely nowhere.

"It wouldn't make any difference to Eric, either," I said. "He's brighter than we are but just as bullheaded."

George said, "What gave you the idea they are starting to play games?"

"I found out by accident." I gave him the story about the anniversary roses and the slit between the drapes. "That was the first time I had an inkling."

"Pretty tough to take, that first inkling, isn't it?" George looked sideways at me with pure malice in his hung-over eyes. "Now you know how I felt."

"If it gives you any satisfaction, I know how you felt."

"That's great. Glad to hear it. They were just kissing, you say?"

"Yeah, but it wasn't any brother-and-sister kind of kiss."

"You ought to know."

"Shut up," I said. "What'll we do about Eric?"

"Talk to him. Tell him we know what's going on. Tell him our little wife will wring him dry in a year and heave him into the ash can with us when the next pair of pants comes by. Anything."

"Eric knows what he owes us, George. He's fond of us. He doesn't want to hurt us if he can help it. He knows what Vicki did to you and what she's doing to me. If all that won't stop him, talking

about it certainly won't either."

George lit another cigarette and blew the smoke straight up against the droplight over his desk. "Eric's a smart kid, Jim. Why the hell isn't he smart enough to see for himself where he's heading if Vicki adds him to her string?"

I said, "He's smart enough. He sees. That's why he was hanging back a little bit last night when they were kissing. He knows what he's letting himself in for. But the poor fool can't help himself any more than I could, or you. When Vicki turns on the high voltage for a guy, who can resist it? She's got too much of what we all want."

George stood up and stepped on his cigarette butt. "Then what's all the moaning about? If that's true, nobody can do anything about Vicki; not even Eric, and he's not a kid anymore, remember. He's a grown man . . . with a college education yet." George's voice was bitter. No laughing now. "So we'll have to let him make his own decisions, I guess. That's how it looks to me."

I stood up, too. "A hell of a lot of help you are!"

George snorted. "Spare me the bleeding heart routine." He started out into the repair shop, and I trailed along after him, feeling sick. He turned his head over his shoulder to give me a dirty grin.

"You've got my sympathy, Jim, for what it's worth. And that's all you really wanted from me, isn't it?"

I couldn't blame George, I thought as I walked back to the drugstore. Nobody had done anything to help *him* when Vicki and I were driving him up the wall last year. As much as he loved Eric, I knew he hated me more, and why not? I'd made a dirty joke out of his marriage and him, and I'd kicked the pedestal out from under his wife. Naturally, he'd enjoy seeing me take some of my own medicine, even at Eric's expense. It was only human, and George never pretended to be anything else.

So that left it up to me.

When I got to the drugstore I went to the prescription room, hung up my street coat and put on the white jacket I wore behind the counter, and all the time I was thinking of Vicki's vitamin capsules.

She kept a bottle of big yellow capsules filled with high-potency B Complex and Vitamin C and whatnot on the breakfast table at home and took one every morning before breakfast. Some dentist had told her years ago to take them to prevent gum infection or something and she never missed.

They were pretty damn good vitamins, as a matter of fact. I

brought her a fresh bottle home from the store every time she ran out. That's what set me thinking about her vitamins: she'd about run out of them again. There'd been only one capsule left in the bottle on the breakfast table this morning, and she'd asked me to bring her another bottle tonight.

Did you know there are lots of ways to gimmick your heart with drugs? There are. I remember in Pharmacy School studying the case history of a guy who took minute injections of a certain drug every day for forty days, then faked a heart attack and collected disability insurance for years afterward on the strength of the electrocardiogram tracings the doctors took of his heart after the alleged coronary. The EKG's showed beyond a doubt that this guy had suffered a coronary, only he hadn't. He'd gimmicked his heart action with those forty small injections.

If a layman can get away with a thing like that, you can imagine what a good pharmacist can do to make unnatural things happen to your heart—and I'm a good pharmacist, if I say so myself.

I got down a bottle of Vicki's vitamins from the shelf and took out one yellow capsule. I pulled the capsule apart and poured the contents of both halves down the

sink. Next I took a pinch of each of two powdered drugs, mixed them together on a spill of paper, then poured the resulting compound through a tiny funnel into a colorless capsule with a three-hour solubility-index. Approximately three hours after ingestion, that capsule's gelatin casing would dissolve and allow its contents to enter the bloodstream. Finally, I slid the filled capsule inside Vicki's empty yellow vitamin casing and closed it up. Looking at it, you couldn't have told that vitamin capsule was any different from the other forty-nine in the bottle of vitamins.

There was a difference, though, for vitamins won't cause a fatal coronary occlusion. My capsule would—three hours after ingestion—and the fatal seizure it caused would be genuine, too. Even an autopsy would not reveal that it had been drug-induced. If Vicki took the capsule before breakfast, she wouldn't die until noon, but she'd be as good as dead the moment she swallowed it.

I used the three-hour casing because I didn't think I could bear to be there with Vicki and see her die. I wanted to be at the store, working, when it happened, professionally detached.

I was surprised I felt so squeamish about it, if you want to know

the truth, but my squeamishness didn't keep me from taking the new bottle of vitamins home to Vicki that night; or from substituting my capsule for the last vitamin pill in Vicki's bottle when I had the chance; or from watching calmly the next morning while Vicki washed my deadly capsule down her throat with a swallow of her breakfast coffee.

I got to the pharmacy at nine-thirty as usual, opened up and went to work. I tried to keep my mind on my job and off Vicki but it wasn't easy. I kept wondering how she'd die. Would she have time to be scared, surprised, suspicious? And *where* she'd die. In the kitchen at home? Our bedroom? The livingroom where I'd seen her kissing Eric? Waiting at the checkout counter of the supermarket?

Wherever it was, I hoped it would happen where she'd be found quickly. I don't know why. Maybe so I wouldn't have to go home and find her myself.

Anyway, time dragged by that morning slower than a sleepwalker's footsteps.

After I'd been working a while, I looked up and saw George coming toward my counter. He walked around the end of it and came into my prescription room. There was no one else in the store at

the time except Elsie up by the fountain, and Genevieve, who takes care of cosmetic sales.

"Morning," George grunted. He leaned a shoulder against my partition and lit a cigarette. His hands had stopped shaking, I noticed, and his eyes had lost their hang-over look.

I said, "Hi, George."

He said, "I couldn't sleep last night for thinking about Eric."

"Neither could I," I made it sarcastic.

"And for the first time in a year, I didn't get smashed. So I want you to be the first to know, Jim."

"Know what?"

"That Vicki's dead."

I stared at him. "She can't be!" I said. I looked at my watch. It was only ten-thirty.

"She is." He grinned at me. "I guarantee it."

I wanted to yell at him but I kept my voice down. "How do you know?"

He tapped the ashes off his cigarette into my mixing mortar. "Because I killed her," he said, "not more than ten minutes ago at your house."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. He was watching me and must have seen I was hit hard, for he said quickly, "Face it, Jim. It was the only thing to do."

I had faced it, but that meant

nothing, now. I said, "What did you do to her, George?"

He shrugged his shoulders like it didn't mean anything. "I took her neck in my hands and squeezed." He held up his grease-stained hands to show me. "It was easy."

"You crazy fool," I said, "you went there in broad daylight? Somebody's sure to have seen you . . ."

He nodded. "Your milkman saw me leaving, matter of fact. But what's the difference? He'll help to prove it was me, not you or Eric. So what can they get me for? Second degree, that's all. I go to see my former wife, plenty of ill feeling between us yet, we get into an argument, I lose control and go for her in a fit of temper. They'll believe that. Because it's the truth, except for the temper part. Maybe I'll get life. But I'll be out in seven years, don't worry. And in the meantime, Eric's off the hook."

He gave me a big grin and raised his eyebrows at me the way he used to do when we were kids. "That's the main thing, isn't it? That Eric is off the hook?"

"Yeah, George," I said. "That's the main thing."

He looked so pleased with himself I didn't have the heart to tell him about my capsule.

Truly it is a patient man who, if a tree dies, plants another in its place.



by
**Jonathan
Craig**

FOR THOSE OF YOU who may be contemplating murder, I would urge in the strongest terms that you develop one of the most homely, and yet most necessary of virtues—namely, patience.

The more sophisticated among you may scoff at such old saws as “Patience pays off,” and “All things come to him who waits,” but the truth is that patience may very well mean the difference between a successful and satisfying murder and an unpleasant and unnerving tenancy on death row.

Patience! It cannot be overemphasized.

Since I believe in neither false modesty nor self-inflation, I will say

at once that although my bodily assets are many, my mental assets are few. I do, however, possess patience, and I possess it to an extraordinary degree.

For example, when I decided to marry for money, I waited almost two years between the decision and the act, even though my appearance and manner are such that women find me not only desirable but, ul-

timately, irresistible. I had many opportunities to marry wealthy young women—more than a dozen such opportunities, in fact—but I waited. I was patient. I wanted not only a girl of great wealth, you see, but also one of great beauty.

My patience paid off. I found exactly the right girl in Elaine Manning, a nineteen-year-old silver blonde who would come into just over half a million dollars on her twenty-first birthday.

My personal attraction is not limited to young women. Elaine's parents not only approved of me as a son-in-law, but gave Elaine and me a ninety-thousand-dollar home on Lake Lenore as a wedding present.

Once again, I was patient. When I said I had decided to marry for money, I meant precisely that: marriage as a means to an end; but I did not trouble myself with thoughts of the day when I would kill Elaine in order to acquire her money. No, I gave it no thought at all. I merely waited and, in all truth, the waiting, with such a wife and home, was not the worst of ordeals. I even, in time, grew quite fond of both.

Then the day arrived when Elaine was twenty-one, and the half-million was hers. It was also the day the real test of patience began. A less forbearing man would have toyed with first one scheme

and then another, until he had hit upon a way that would seem to offer the greatest possible chance for success together with the smallest possible risk to himself.

Not I. I was patient, knowing that sooner or later the ideal opportunity would present itself, and that when it did I would recognize it as such and take advantage of it at once. It would be some happening, some accident perhaps, that would result in Elaine's death—a happening or accident engineered or capitalized upon by me, but in which my hand could not be discerned.

So I waited—a year and eight months, to be exact—until the night of Leda Callan's party.

It was the coldest night of the coldest January on record. Last week's snow was still on the ground, and Lake Lenore was solid ice, gleaming in the moonlight, swept clean by a constant, driving wind from the north.

The lake was shaped like an hourglass. Leda Callan's place was directly across the waist of the hourglass from our own, a distance of some three-quarters of a mile.

Leda welcomed us effusively, as she welcomed everyone, but she had a few special endearments for me—not one of which was lost on my wife. Elaine was far from blind to Leda's infatuation with me. That was Elaine's word for it, *infatua-*

tion. I myself felt it to be something very much deeper than that.

Leda was the merriest of young widows, and an extremely pretty one—if one's taste runs to vivid and sultry brunettes—and Elaine had become unreasonably jealous of her. She had, in fact, stalked out of Leda's last party in a jealous pet and walked home by herself across the frozen lake. I had remained for some time, as a matter of principle, and then followed.

So, this night, I was not surprised when my wife began to drink in a way that could mean only that she was determined to get blind drunk. She achieved that goal in less than two hours, and once again, after a vehement if almost incoherent denunciation of both Leda Callan and me, she announced that she was going home; whereupon she got her coat and boots and marched angrily out of the house.

No one paid much attention. The party was at its height and, after all, Elaine had done exactly the same thing once before. Since I hadn't heard our car start, I knew that, as before, she was walking home across the ice.

I had been in no mood for the party to begin with, and I had no desire for the unpleasantness Elaine would subject me to if, as before, I failed to go after her.

Another exercise in patience, you

see. Reasonable or not, Elaine's jealousy was real, and patience as a way of life means exercising it in small things as well as large.

The men had put their things in what had once been the maid's room, on the first floor at the rear of the house. I got my overcoat and galoshes and left by the back door.

As I said, it was a very bright night. I saw Elaine at once. She was lying in the snow, only a few feet from the door. I knelt down beside her. She had passed out, I saw, her face as beautiful and serene as if she had merely been asleep.

I tried to rouse her, but I could not. I shook her violently, but she was beyond waking. I knelt there beside her, gazing out across the cold, icy glare of the lake. It was then I realized that the ideal opportunity I had awaited so long had at last arrived. My patience had been rewarded.

Elaine would soon freeze to death in this sub-zero cold. She would die even sooner out on the windswept ice and, best of all, she would appear to have died as a result of her own rash decision to walk home across the frozen lake. It would be clear to everyone that she had, in her drunken helplessness, sunk or fallen to the ice, from which she had been unwilling or unable to rise, and on which she

had painlessly and swiftly died.

I had not announced my own intention to leave the party. No one had seen me leave, and a minimum of caution would insure that no one saw me return. The entire situation was ready-made.

As I have said, I have many physical assets, and among them are unusual strength and exceptional stamina. I could easily carry Elaine a considerable distance out onto the ice, then return to the house and rejoin the party, all in no more than ten minutes.

I draped Elaine across my shoulder—an insignificant burden, indeed, for a man my size—and crossed the forty feet of snow between the house and the edge of the lake. I moved carefully across the ice at first; then, finding the surface much less treacherous than I had feared, I began to progress at a fast lope that put the yards behind me in short order.

I continued for what I judged to be four or five minutes. Then I lowered Elaine to the ice, arranged her in the curled-up position she so often assumed in sleep, and opened her coat so that it would provide as little protection as possible. Then I ran back toward the house.

I had never in my life felt quite so exhilarated. I found the cold invigorating and actually enjoyed the

stinging bite of the wind slicing against my face. After all, I had been patient for a very long time, and the sudden and complete release was euphoric.

I had just started across the strip of snow between the lake and the



house when a figure stepped from the shadow of the garage. It was Leda Callan.

I stopped in my tracks, staring at her.

"Hello, Mel," she said quietly.

I didn't say anything. I don't believe that, at that moment, I could have.

She approached me, smiling a little. "That was really quite a sprint," she said in that soft, throaty voice of hers. "Tell me, did you run as fast on the way out?"

I hadn't been out of breath before, but now I was. I took a deep breath, and then another, watching her.

She moved even closer. "I was upstairs in the back bedroom. I love the view across the lake at night, and I looked out. Then I happened to glance down." She shook her head wonderingly. "It was the strangest thing. I would have sworn I saw someone put someone else on his shoulder and start off across the lake."

We stood looking at each other for what must have been a full ten seconds. Then, as if in response to some silent signal, we both turned and looked out across the ice.

It was too bad, but the ideal opportunity had turned out to be something less than that. I would, it seemed, have to be patient a while longer.

The only thing I could do now was to go back to Elaine, carry her home, and wait for another opportunity. I was very disappointed, of course, but I knew that patience would see me through, just as it had done so often in the past.

As for what Leda Callan might think or say, I was completely unconcerned: I would simply explain that I had caught up with my wife on the lake, had learned that she had left her small clutch bag at Leda's place, and had run back to the house to get it.

I sighed and turned toward the back door.

"Where are you going?" Leda asked.

"Elaine left her bag. I came back to get it."

"She had her bag when she left," Leda said. "I distinctly remember seeing it in her hand."

"Oh?"

She laughed, as if she were genuinely amused, and said, "Are you losing your nerve, darling? You mustn't, you know."

"What?" I managed to say.

"You're adorable when you try to play the innocent. You know that I know perfectly well what you've done."

"Listen—" I began.

"And I know why," she said. "I had hoped against hope, but I never dared dream that you would . . ."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Please, darling. You needn't pretend. *I know.*"

"Leda—"

"To think that you wanted me enough to kill her," she said. "Oh, darling, how wonderful!" She pressed her body against me so hard that, instinctively, my arms went around her.

I tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come.

"It's been just you and me from the very beginning, hasn't it?" she said softly. "Just you and me, Mel. And we both knew something like this would have to happen, didn't we? I mean, something that would let us be together."

I tried to disengage my arms, but she misinterpreted my movements and snuggled closer.

"She wasn't right for you, Mel," she said. "She was too cold, too self-centered. She never appreciated you. She never knew how lucky she was." Her arms tightened about me. "Oh, how I hated her! A woman like that, standing between us."

Over Leda's shoulder I thought I could see a tiny dark dot far out on the ice. Was it really Elaine in her mink coat, or my imagination? My imagination, probably; I'd carried her out there a long way.

"It's all so completely perfect," Leda said. "And she isn't even suf-

fering. Did you know that? People who freeze to death don't suffer at all." She tilted her head back to look up at me. "We'll wait till spring," she added.

"Spring?"

She laughed. "To be married, you idiot. I mean, we can't very well be married on the way home from the funeral. What would people say? It'll look much better if we wait a few months." She sighed, nestling her head against my chest. "I'll bet we'll think that spring will never come."

I kept looking out to where I thought I'd seen the dot on the ice. Now I didn't see it at all.

"I'm cold," Leda said, and then laughed. "I almost said I was freezing to death." She shivered. "Let's go inside."

"And let things take their course?"

"It's fated, Mel. It has to be. Just as you and I were fated to belong to each other."

"Do you realize that in the eyes of the law you and I will be equally guilty?"

"Of course I do. I also know that a wife can't be forced to testify against her husband, and that's exactly the way I want it, Mel. I want to have a part in making it possible for us to have each other." She grasped my hand and took a short step toward the house. "Please,

Mel. I'm really very, very cold."

I let her lead me into the kitchen. I had been thinking, and I knew that another opportunity to kill Elaine might be years, perhaps many years, away. I didn't, of course, doubt my ability to be patient; it was just that I had suddenly realized that my patience might be better deployed elsewhere.

After all, Leda Callan was a woman of great wealth, too.

We had the kitchen to ourselves. Leda went to the liquor cabinet and selected a bottle of a fine rosé wine, of which she knew I was very fond, and poured two glasses.

"This really ought to be champagne," she said, going up on her toes to kiss my cheek as she handed me one of the glasses. "But anyhow it's wine, and wine is best for toasts."

"I suppose a toast is in order, at that," I said.

She raised her glass. "To us, darling."

We drank.

As I lowered my glass I looked out the kitchen window at the cold moon-glare on the lake. I could see

the dot again. It was Elaine, all right; there was no question about it.

Then I thought of how Lake Lenore would be in the spring, after Leda and I were married, and I knew there would be other dots out there—small pleasure boats, like the one Leda owned; Leda, who couldn't swim.

Perhaps an ideal opportunity would present itself. Who could say that Leda's boat might not capsize, and that Leda might not drown, even though I made a valiant effort to save her?

Yes, if one were patient, some such happening would surely come to pass.

"You'll have to be patient, darling," Leda said.

It startled me; it was almost as if she had read my mind, but almost instantly I realized what she had meant, and I smiled at her.

"It'll seem like forever," she said, moving close to me. "Waiting for spring, I mean."

I raised my glass and touched it to hers.


"A toast to patience," I said.





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It can now be stated with equanimity that the simplest of transactions are not always mutually rewarding.



for Mr. RUSSELL



by
Wendy
Morgan

HAVING CHECKED IN at the hotel, Leigh Russell showered and changed, and then went into the lounge and sat down to decide what to do. This time yesterday he had been worth twenty pounds, plus a few quite decent clothes. Today, thanks to that tip for Billy Boy who had romped home at twenty-five to one, he had five hundred pounds in his wallet. You could

do something with real money like that if you went the right way about it. The only question was, what was the right way?

It was half past eleven and he decided that a drink might sharpen his wits a little. He beckoned a waiter, and as he did so he caught sight of the sober front of a bank. So, Reid's Bank had a branch located in the foyer of the Grand Ho-

tel. The germ of an idea wormed its way into his brain.

He sat, slowly sipping his pink gin with eyes fixed on the plain frontage of Reid's Bank; he thought hard.

At last he rose, made his way to the grill room and sat down to a solitary lunch. At a quarter to three, having signed the bill and left an ample but not ostentatious tip, he rose and strolled out into the foyer and through the door of the bank.

Closeted with the manager, he explained his business.

"I've been abroad for some considerable time," he said, "and just got back. I should like to open an account with you. I can furnish you with the usual references. It's too dangerous wandering around London with a lot of loose cash on one, so I'd like to deposit this with you right away. There's about five hundred pounds there. I'll keep twenty and deposit the rest. Perhaps you'll let me have a chequebook."

The various formalities completed, Leigh Russell strolled out again. It was just three o'clock and the bank was closing its doors for the day. So far, so good.

Collecting his hat, he went out into the warm spring sunshine, walked up Park Lane a little way, turned into Brook Street and thence to Bond Street. Here he halted a few yards from Browne's,

exclusive jewelers, stopping in apparent interest in front of a picture shop two doors away. It was nearly half past three; in a few minutes old Blair would be going out to tea.

He had not long to wait. From the door of the jewelers' shop emerged the pompous little figure of John Blair, its manager. Leigh walked toward him and stopped abruptly in front of him.

"Well, if it isn't my old friend Blair," he said, genially holding out a hand, from which the other drew back in evident distaste.

"Oh—er—yes, Russell, of course. You must excuse me, but I have an urgent appointment. See you another time." Blair hurried off in a most undignified manner.

Leigh grinned. He could imagine Blair's thoughts, his embarrassment and annoyance at being accosted by one whom he considered a very shady customer, indeed. Then he strolled into the jewelers' shop. An assistant came forward. "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"I want a watch. Something really charming for a charming lady. Set with diamonds, perhaps."

"Certainly, sir." The assistant was obviously hopeful at the prospect of a good sale. "I've a lovely little thing here, a real beauty." He produced the watch, an exquisite trifle. Leigh examined it.

"Yes, quite pretty. Any more?"

The assistant produced several others, but Leigh kept returning to the first one.

"No, this is the one I like. How much is it?"

"Three hundred and fifty pounds, sir. And well worth it, if I may say so."

"H'm. Three-fifty. Well, yes, I think I'll take that one. I'll write you a cheque. I'd like to take it with me. It's the lady's birthday today, and you know how women are."

The man's expression changed slightly. "Er—yes, sir. You must excuse the question, but have we done business with you before? Or can you give me any references?"

"I bank at Reid's, Grand Hotel Branch, and I'm staying at the Grand, but I can't say they know me well," answered Leigh.

"I see, sir. It's rather difficult because the bank's closed now. If you could only refer me to someone we know—"

"Good lord, man, I've been away for ages. I know hardly anyone in London. Well, it looks as if I shall have to go somewhere else. I'm surprised—disappointed too. When I met John Blair a few minutes ago he said you would be able to look after me, so I thought it would be all right. Still, if you can't—"

"Ah!" The assistant's attitude

changed instantly, "Mr. Blair? Do you know him well, sir, may I ask?" He gazed at Leigh with a calculating eye.

"Oh, yes, I've known him for many years. Let me see, what can I tell you about him? He's a little fellow, rather like Mr. Pickwick in appearance, but not such a nice nature." He grinned conspiratorially. "But don't tell him I said that," he added. "He lives at 444 Upper Drive, Harrow. Right?"

The man smiled with relief; it *was* all right. "I think that's good enough, sir," he said, and he packed the little watch tenderly in cotton wool while Leigh wrote out a cheque.

A cruising taxi picked him up and deposited him in a few minutes outside Levinson's, the pawnbroker. Mr. Levinson attended to his customer personally.

"I want to sell this," said Leigh, and he did not attempt to hide the cardboard box with Browne's name on it as he took the watch from its layer of cotton wool.

Mr. Levinson nodded. "How much?" he asked, his sharp eyes twinkling.

"Two hundred and fifty."

"Two hundred."

"Why, dammit, I paid three-fifty for it only this—only recently," protested Leigh.

"Maybe you did. I've got to make

a profit. Two hundred," said Levinson.

Leigh yielded. "Oh, all right. Pound notes," he stipulated.

Levinson stared and shrugged. "Okay," he muttered, and counted them out on the counter.

After his caller had left, Levinson examined the watch again. It had come from Browne's and the fellow had said he had given three-fifty for it, bought it recently; he had almost said this morning or this week. Funny. Levinson himself sailed too near the wind occasionally to welcome official enquiries into his business. Better to check with Browne's. He lifted the receiver.

Leigh, meanwhile, chuckled to himself as he sauntered along. Levinson would certainly get in touch with Browne's. The next move was up to Blair.

That gentleman came back to the shop after a leisurely tea. "Anything doing, Simmons?" he enquired.

"Yes, sir." Simmons spoke with relish. "I've sold that diamond wristwatch that came in yesterday."

"You've sold it? Who to?" Mr. Blair looked incredulous and faintly annoyed. His assistant had no right to bring off a sale like that by himself—give him ideas!

"A friend of yours, sir," replied Simmons, noting the signs with

satisfaction. "A Mr. Leigh Russell."

"Leigh Russell! A friend of mine!" Words failed Blair momentarily, then he asked hastily, "Did he pay for it?"

"Yes, sir. By cheque."

"By cheque! You didn't let him take it away, did you?"

Simmons began to look alarmed. "Why—why, yes, sir," he stammered. "He knew you and said he'd just met you outside the shop and you said I was to look after him."

"Oh, you—you fool!" exploded Blair. "He's the biggest crook in London, and you let him walk away with a three hundred and fifty pound watch! Wait till the governor hears about this. It'll be your last day in this job!" He hesitated, frightened. What about his own job?

"Get the police on the phone at once," he commanded, "although God knows where he'll have got to by now. How long ago did he leave?"

"About twenty minutes. But he said he was staying at the Grand."

"Grand, me foot!" retorted Mr. Blair inelegantly. "And you fell for that! Well, what are you waiting for? Dial 999."

Before Simmons could comply, however, the telephone rang. He picked up the receiver.

"Mr. Levinson, sir," he said to

Blair. "I'd like a word with you."

The police were with them very quickly and the story was soon told.

"You say he said he was staying at the Grand?"

"Of course he's not staying there. Impossible!" exclaimed Blair. He stared at Simmons malignantly. "Anyone but a born fool would know that. He's got crook written all over him!" he added spitefully and untruthfully.

"Well, anyway, that seems to be the first place to enquire," said the policeman, shutting his notebook and rising. "All right, sir. We'll get cracking on this right away and you'll be hearing from us." To the frightened and indignant Blair he sounded shockingly casual, almost indifferent.

The policeman next applied himself to the manager of the Grand. That gentleman appeared to be shocked that one of his guests should be the subject of such enquiries. "I'll find out if he's in," he said coldly.

"Not in the hotel at present," he informed the policeman a few minutes later. "Lunched in the grill room and signed the bill. The doorman saw him go out about three o'clock but he hasn't been back since."

"I see. May I use your telephone?"

"I'll have to leave someone here in case he returns. But I don't suppose he will. He's well away by now."

The manager was shocked. "Not in uniform, I hope," he quavered. The policeman reassured him.

Leigh Russell, meanwhile, spent an enjoyable two or three hours in a cinema. When he came out it was nearly seven o'clock. Dinner followed in a quiet, exclusive restaurant, and it was after nine when he walked into the Grand. The doorman looked slightly taken aback to see him. News travels fast behind staff doors.

"Oh, good evening, sir. There's a gentleman waiting to see you, I believe."

He glanced behind him as he spoke and gave a faint nod to the individual seated in the foyer. The man got up.

"Mr. Russell?"

Leigh nodded.

"I'm from Scotland Yard." He showed his card.

Leigh's reply was a little louder than might have been anticipated, and at once attracted the attention of the chattering crowd passing in and out of the American Bar or sipping drinks in the lounge.

"Scotland Yard?" he echoed. "And to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I understand you bought a diamond wristwatch from Browne's

in Bond Street today for the sum of three hundred and fifty pounds, which you paid by cheque."

"Well?" Leigh's raised voice was faintly belligerent.

"And immediately afterwards you took it to Levinson's, in Oxford Street, and sold it to them for two hundred pounds."

"So what?" The crowd was definitely getting interested now. A hush had fallen on the lounge and they were listening delightedly to every word.

"Well, it's rather an unusual thing to do."

"That's my business. Who called the police in, anyway?"

"Those at Browne's were rather worried when they were informed by Mr. Levinson of this transaction."

"I see." Now Leigh's voice was grim. "In other words, Browne's thought I had obtained the watch by fraud and was selling it to get two hundred pounds for nothing, eh? Well, Mr. Whatever-your-name is, you can tell Browne's that I think they'll find my cheque will be honoured in the morning when the bank opens, and that I take a pretty poor view of having my private affairs enquired into in public by the police. Good evening." Without a backward glance at the policeman or the gaping crowd, he strode to the lift and was lost to view.

At five past ten the next morning Leigh was sitting up in bed, eating an excellent breakfast. His bedside telephone rang and an agitated voice asked if that was Mr. Russell.

"It is. Who wants me?"

"This is Browne's. Mr. Browne would like to speak to you, Mr. Russell."

Leigh grinned at the receiver.

A cultured voice spoke: "Mr. Russell? My name is Browne. You bought a diamond wristwatch from my shop yesterday and, owing to an unfortunate misunderstanding, my assistant was under the impression that your cheque would—er—was—"

"Yes, Mr. Browne?"

"I am deeply sorry that such a thing should have occurred, Mr. Russell. I hope you will accept my very sincere apology."

"It's rather late for apologies, Mr. Browne. I am seeing my solicitors at eleven-thirty and after that the matter will be entirely in their hands. You have, of course, confirmed that my cheque is in order?"

"Please, Mr. Russell, there need be no trouble about this, I'm sure. The whole matter can be settled between ourselves. Can you come and see me this morning?"

"Certainly not. I'm far too busy."

"I'll come and see you, right away. Don't do anything hasty, Mr. Russell." Browne rang off.

Leigh chuckled and made a leisurely toilet. He was reading the morning paper when his caller was announced.

Browne came to the point right away. "Mr. Russell, if you take this matter to court the publicity will do neither of us any good. All you will gain will be a certain financial compensation, and questions will certainly be asked as to why you immediately sold the watch at a loss of a hundred and fifty pounds." He was watching Leigh's face shrewdly, but it told him nothing.

"If I *am* asked such a question in court I am perfectly willing to answer it. In the meantime, however, I am not disposed to tell you my purely personal reasons for changing my mind about keeping the watch," answered Leigh.

"No, no, of course not," said Browne hurriedly. "Anyway, I'm quite willing to meet you in the matter. Supposing I return the amount of your cheque—three-fifty—and we'll call it quits."

"I am instructing my solicitor to sue for two thousand," Leigh told him quietly.

"Two thousand, but that's monstrous!"

"The police interviewed the manager of this hotel," Leigh pointed out. "He and all the staff are aware that enquiries have been

made about me, as if—as if I were an undesirable character!" he added indignantly. "Then last night in the lounge, in full view of all the guests, I was met by a detective who wanted an account of my purely private actions. Three of my acquaintances have already heard about it and rung me up this morning. I have just arrived back in this country after a long absence and need to establish myself and my credit before I can start business in any form. This affair may have done me irreparable harm. In the circumstances, I consider my demands are extremely modest. Whether the court thinks so or not remains to be seen, but at any rate I have nothing to hide and would prefer the whole affair to be made public in order to clear my name."

Mr. Browne took out his cheque-book in a businesslike manner. "I'll give you one thousand—take it or leave it," he snapped.

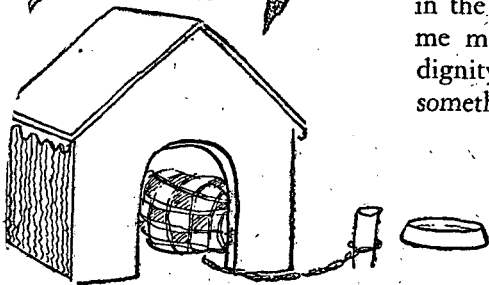
"I'll take it," was the prompt reply.

Leigh Russell sat down in the lounge with a pink gin on the table in front of him. Nearly fifteen hundred pounds! You could do something with a sum like that if you went the right way about it. The only question was, what was the right way?

Would anyone care to insist, at this point, that a "dog bites man" item is not newsworthy?

IT WAS A NUTTY AD, and I should never have answered it. Nutty ads are likely to have been written by nuts, and some nuts are dangerous. Gerald Rothmore, in his own peculiar way, was one of the dangerous ones.

THE BEAST



INSIDE by C.E. Gilford

Such ads are written for nuts too you might say. I disagree. I'm no nuts, or at least I wasn't at the start. I was desperate, though; I'll admit to that, and greedy, no doubt.

Young man, the ad read, to whom no type of work is too degrading, can earn big money in one year. Address Box 734.

Degrading, now there was an interesting word; not *debauching*. That would have meant "immoral." I'll bet there were plenty of that kind of nut who answered the ad, too, but *degrading* to me meant something else. I'm not real bright or I wouldn't have been desperate in the first place, but *degrading* to me meant something beneath the dignity of a human being . . . something animal . . . and brutal.

Downgrading, that is; downgrading a human being from the rank of man to the rank of brute. Anyway, that was the approach I took when I answered the ad, and I guess I was right.

I was granted an interview. Hundreds of guys must have answered the ad, ready to take part in any kind of orgies for pay, but I got the impression that there weren't many interviews—maybe only one.

It was set up in a downtown office, obviously rented just for this purpose, because the place was almost bare, with just one desk and three chairs. Gerald Rothmore was in one of the chairs behind the desk. A guy named Mr. Alberti, probably a lawyer because he carried a black briefcase, sat in another chair off to the side. The third chair was for me.

Mr. Alberti didn't amount to much. Small, square-faced, wearing horn-rimmed glasses, he was probably smart, though, and he must have been there because there were legal problems involved in this proposition.

Rothmore was something else. I didn't need to have read his ad to suspect something unusual about him. He was an old man, in his sixties anyway; thin, narrow-faced, with lots of wild, white hair on top of it. His whole body was thin. He looked like a scarecrow in his

baggy suit, and when he sat behind the desk he slumped down, kind of collapsed like someone had let the stuffing out of the scarecrow, but his eyes never relaxed. It was his eyes that were strange; cold blue, ice-cold, unfeeling, almost empty, yet very intense. I felt right away like I was on an operating table in a concentration camp, and this guy was an insane doctor preparing for surgery on me without an anesthetic.

"So you're Stanley J. Kassel," he began in a toneless voice, kind of hissing. I nodded. We had already settled my identity, I thought. "You wrote an interesting letter, Mr. Kassel."

I nodded. Maybe I was a little nervous.

"Yours was one of the very few answers, Mr. Kassel, which seemed to indicate an understanding of the requirements of this position. You seemed to understand what degrading means."

I waited.

"Mr. Kassel, why are you willing to accept a degrading job?"

There was no use being anything but frank with this guy. "I'm dead broke," I said.

Rothmore's stare had never wavered for one second. "But you look intelligent," he remarked, "and your letter sounded intelligent. Why don't you get an ordinary job, make

money in just an ordinary way?"

"I've tried that," I told him, "and it doesn't work. Not for me, anyway. You need to get a break once in a while, too, and I never have."

Then I found myself, with some prodding from Rothmore, giving details of my job history: a couple of selling things . . . didn't have the right personality; a couple of routine office jobs . . . dull and poor pay; a couple of times in small businesses on my own . . . but I just didn't have the stuff. All in all, I had demonstrated very little earning capacity in the "ordinary way."

On the other hand, I was very interested in money. "I'll try anything," I finished, "short of committing a crime."

"Why stop there?" Rothmore asked quickly.

"Look—" I began.

He waved a thin hand at me. "I'm not proposing a criminal career for you, Mr. Kassel. Your remark merely amused me." He didn't look amused, however. Apparently his stony expression never changed.

"What are you proposing, Mr. Rothmore?" I asked. I'd told him everything about myself. Now it was his turn.

He wasn't angry at my impatience. Nothing perturbed him. "I propose a scientific experiment," he said.

I waited. Maybe my scalp crawled a little. Maybe he was the insane doctor in a concentration camp.

"A psychological experiment, Mr. Kassel. I'm not a professor of psychology, however. I hold no degrees. I hang no shingle. I'm merely a student of this infant science. I'm an amateur, a rich amateur. That's why I can afford to pay the subjects of my experiments. In your case, and for this experiment, I am willing to pay quite a lot."

I wanted to ask how much, but I controlled my curiosity, waiting for a description of the experiment.

"I'm most interested in the psychology of degradation," Rothmore droned on. "I'm looking for the answer to one question. How low can a man fall? Men have fallen rather low in the past, I'm well aware. The depths of human cruelty, for instance, are matters of historical record; the doings in the arenas of ancient Rome, for instance. Then there's medieval torture, Oriental torture, the police procedures of modern totalitarian regimes. Possibly the depths have been plumbed in this direction, but there's man's inclination toward bestial behavior in sexual matters, also recorded, though in books less widely distributed. There are other types of degradation too, of course, such as the degradation forced

upon individuals and entire nations by conquerors, by poverty, by natural catastrophes. People are forced into slavery, into betrayal of one another, robbery of one another, even cannibalism. All very interesting, don't you think, Mr. Kassel?"

I swallowed. "I guess so," I managed to say. I couldn't complain; I'd asked for this.

"By studying the depths to which man may fall," Rothmore said, "perhaps we can perceive to what heights he may rise."

I couldn't comment on that. It was just this nut's pious justification for his "experiments."

"I'm not interested in what people are forced to do," Rothmore continued. Obviously he was in love with the sound of his own voice. "What I am interested in, is the depth into which people plunge willingly, voluntarily, often with their eyes wide open, aware of the implications and the consequences. They plunge because of flaws in their characters, you see. This is what I am asking you to do, Mr. Kassel, to plunge to animal depths, to become an animal. You'll do it, perhaps, because you have a flaw in your character. The flaw is greed."

I squirmed, but the old guy had me. "All right," I said, "I'm greedy. Otherwise I wouldn't have an-

swered your ad. Your ad mentioned 'big money.' I'm interested in big money. Okay. What do I do?"

"Become an animal."

"Sure, sure. But what does that mean?"

"You live completely like an animal."

"I still don't get it, Mr. Rothmore. How do you mean? Live in a pigpen? Eat garbage?"

Rothmore shook his head of wild white hair. "Worse," he said.

The little lawyer sat there without the least expression. Slumped in his chair behind the desk, Rothmore put the tips of his fingers together into a pyramid and gazed at me over the top of it, still no emotion showing, only that strange intensity.

"Worse?" I echoed.

"Yes."

Boy, this guy was a nut, but I was curious now, and still greedy, I guess. My imagination took off. "I get it. I'm supposed to live in a cage, and let people stare at me. They stare at me even at the most embarrassing times—"

That old wild mane of Rothmore's shook negatively again. "Worse," he interrupted.

I sat back. "Well, I just don't follow you, then," I told him.

That gave him a chance for another lecture. "I'm glad you men-

tioned the pigpen and the cage, Mr. Kassel. Now let's take the inhabitants of the pigpen and the barnyard, pigs, cattle, sheep, fattening themselves for the slaughter. That's not degradation, it's stupidity. The horse is in rather a different category, of course. He strikes a rather better bargain with his master—food and security in exchange for work. There's even a bit of dignity to that."

Rothmore paused and was silent for a moment, possibly meditating upon horse psychology.

"Let's take the inhabitants of cages," he went on, finally. "These are not domestic animals, but wild animals that have been captured and imprisoned. They're in those cages much against their will. They'd like to escape. You see them pacing behind the bars. The powerful ones will turn on their keepers if they get the chance. No, Mr. Kassel, there's a dignified martyrdom in the plight of caged animals."

"Okay," I said when he paused again, "where does that leave me?"

He waved aside my question, though he continued to stare at me. "The lowest of the animals," he lectured on, "are those we call pets. These creatures, originally wild, have, for the sake of food and shelter, sold their independence to man. All sorts of animals will do

this to some extent on occasion—squirrels, guinea pigs, snakes, for instance—but I'm thinking principally of the two usual varieties of pets. Number one, cats. Now these creatures maintain their independence to a degree, sometimes even dictate to their masters, but they grovel for food, for fondling. Yes, even though they're hypocritical about it, they grovel. The absolute lowest of the animal world, however, in terms of self-degradation, is undoubtedly the species known as 'man's best friend'."

I blinked.

"Do you realize, Mr. Kassel, that that very phrase, 'man's best friend', indicates this animal, to curry human favor, will turn against his own kind? Do you see my point, Mr. Kassel?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Dogs degrade themselves infinitely. They beg for food. They beg to be let in the house. They beg to be petted. They fawn over their masters. The dog, Mr. Kassel, has the true slave mentality. Do you understand?"

"If you say so . . ."

"I want you to become a dog, Mr. Kassel."

"A dog?"

"My dog. I want you to get down on all fours, to eat and drink by thrusting your muzzle into a bowl. Forget the fact that you have

hands, and use these appendages as paws. Forget that you have a human voice and vocabulary, and instead only bark. Trot at my heels as I walk about my house, be led on a leash, obey my orders, and be thrashed when you disobey. Nuzzle my leg and plead for my affection . . ."

Somewhere in the middle of that job description, I jumped out of my chair. "You're crazy!" I finally managed to interrupt him.

"You don't like the idea?"

"Well, you may be crazy, Mr. Rothmore, but that doesn't mean I have to be crazy, too."

"I'm not interested," he said, sitting there calmly, "in your estimate of my psychological health, but the fact is, you're not interested in becoming the subject of a scientific study."

"No."

"There are some jobs that are too degrading for you."

"Yes."

"Too bad. You would have made a good subject. I can't use a skid row bum, you know. He has no dignity, no spirit of independence. There's not enough in him to degrade. It is indeed too bad, Mr. Kassel; especially too bad since you also need money. Mr. Alberti here has drawn up a contract containing ironclad guarantees that you would not be cheated in the

payment of your salary. The one-year salary was to be a hundred thousand dollars."

For the moment, that enormous sum registered only as a measure of Rothmore's insanity. "You're nuttier than a dozen fruitcakes!" I told him, and then I walked out.

Things didn't go well for me. After that interview with Rothmore, I went out and got myself an honest job, stock boy in a supermarket. I was a man, but they insisted on calling the job "stock boy," and all the time I opened cartons and stacked cans on shelves, the word "degradation" kept hammering in my brain. Maybe every job was degrading, huh? And stock boys don't get paid anything like a hundred grand per annum.

Three days later I got myself another "honest" job. I became an office slave again. There's no other description for it; slave, the same as if I were picking cotton on a plantation, or pulling an oar for some old Roman ship captain. The shackles weren't visible, but they were there.

That weekend I sat in the grimy little den that I called "my apartment" and read the Want Ads, and there it was again. "Young man to whom no type of work is too degrading . . ."

Rothmore still needed a "dog." Was there any real difference, I

started asking myself, between "dog" and "stock boy"? "Dog" and "slave"? One certainly paid better than the other two.

A hundred grand! Ironclad contract!

That Sunday night I found Mr. Rothmore's phone number and gave him a call.

Does every dog hate its master? I can't speak for the rest, but I hated Rothmore from the beginning.

"Stanley," he said. "One can't call a dog Stanley. It just isn't a doggy name. Now what is a doggy name? Rover? Fido?"

It became Fido, about as low as a four-letter word can get. I'm six-one, considered not bad-looking. My name is Stanley Joseph Kassel—but I answered to the name Fido, and the minute I signed that contract and got down on my hands and knees, I became about two-feet-six, and I must have looked ridiculous.

Oh, the contract was okay. I spent a week studying it before I signed. My duties were outlined in detail. "Required to perform only those actions which canines kept as pets ordinarily perform," one section read. Nothing "unnatural", nothing dangerous; Rothmore simply wanted me to act like a dog, and he was willing to pay. One thousand for the first month of service, two thousand for the

second, and so on. At the end of the twelfth month, a bonus of twenty-two thousand. A hundred thousand in all. If I quit at any time, I'd lose that month's salary but I wouldn't be cheated of my money. Rothmore was too rich to bother with that. The money would be deposited monthly in my bank account, by Mr. Alberti. He thought it was crazy too, but he saw to it that everything was legal. "Here, Fido!"

Rothmore lived in a penthouse with eight rooms, a terrace, and a garden. The first few days he delighted in going to some place in the joint farthest from where I happened to be, and calling me.

"Obedience training," he described it.

A man's knees aren't made to walk on. Neither are the palms of his hands. They get sore. I hadn't counted on that. A man isn't made to get down on his knees to another man, much less down on his hands and knees!

Was it a new discovery that I had pride? It shouldn't have been. I had always hated flunky jobs, but I didn't know what pride was till I got down on my hands and knees to that old devil Rothmore.

"William, put some ointment on Fido's paws. He'll get used to this, but right now his paws are sore, I suspect. We'll let him lie down and

rest a while here in the kitchen."

William was the butler-cook-handyman. He was about fifty, scarcely ever spoke, just did as he was told. When he knelt down and put the ointment on my knees and the palms of my hands, our eyes met a couple of times. It was I who looked away. William performed degrading chores too, waiting on old Rothmore; but at least he could work standing upright, like a man.

I hated William, too. William was the one who fed me.

"No bones," Mr. Rothmore said. "After all, Fido isn't really a dog. He's just acting like a dog. He doesn't have the teeth and jaws for grinding bones. His food will have to be soft things. You'll have to prepare it special. You won't be able to get enough by scraping the plates."

Oh yes, dogs eat leftovers, and are glad to get them; and it was in the contract: "Sufficient supply of nourishing food to supplement edible table scraps," or something like that. I ate Rothmore's scraps, and William's, and Alberti's when he came to dinner once a week to discuss Rothmore's financial affairs.

"No hands, Fido. No hands, remember that."

It was William's job, when Rothmore didn't have time, to watch me eating. Who'd want to use hands anyway when the hands are

black from floor dirt? No washing before dinner. Dogs don't wash for dinner. Just stick your snout into the bowl and gobble what's there. You get it all over your face, but no hands! A dog has a long tongue to lick his mouth and jaws. A man doesn't. I'm still a man, I kept telling myself. I tried to be as careful as I could while I was eating, but William, maybe acting under orders, made things as tough as he could. Gravy . . . Rothmore liked gravied things . . . And a man really can't get his face inside a dog's eating bowl. It's a mess. You suck and you slurp. Then afterwards you try to rub your face with your arm . . . or is it your foreleg? . . . to remove as much garbage as you can. No brushing teeth after a meal, either. Ye gods, I thought, my teeth will be so dirty and rotten at the end of the year that I'll have to use a good piece of that hundred grand to get them all pulled and install a set of false ones.

An occupational hazard, I told myself. Every job has them. But that reminder didn't help. After the first two or three days, I was already an animal, foul-smelling, caked with filth. After a week, although I spent most of my time outdoors in the fresh air, I couldn't stand myself. After a month, however, I'd become toughened. I

could endure. But I was miserable.

"How do you like it by this time, Fido?"

Rothmore stood over me in the kitchen. By raising my head I could gaze at his trouser legs, but I couldn't look into his face, of course, and I couldn't answer. Dogs don't possess the power of speech.

"Had enough?"

I shook my head.

"None of that, my lad," he scolded me quickly. "You really don't understand my words, you know. You're nothing but a dumb brute. Don't forget that. Anyway, I'm glad to see you enduring it. Miserable though, aren't you? Down there on all fours. You'll get used to it, though. Right now your pride probably pains you more than your knees, but if you stick it out, you'll eventually lose your pride. You'll forget what it was to be human. You'll *become* a beast, content with food and shelter."

He bent down. I felt his palm stroking my head lightly. "Good dog, Fido," he said.

I shouldn't have done it, granted, but when a man is down on his hands and knees, his head hangs from his neck rather than sitting on top of it. This puts the brain in a different position, an inhuman position. A man can't think clearly. Maybe he starts to

think, react like an animal. This Rothmore was tormenting me.

So I bit him.

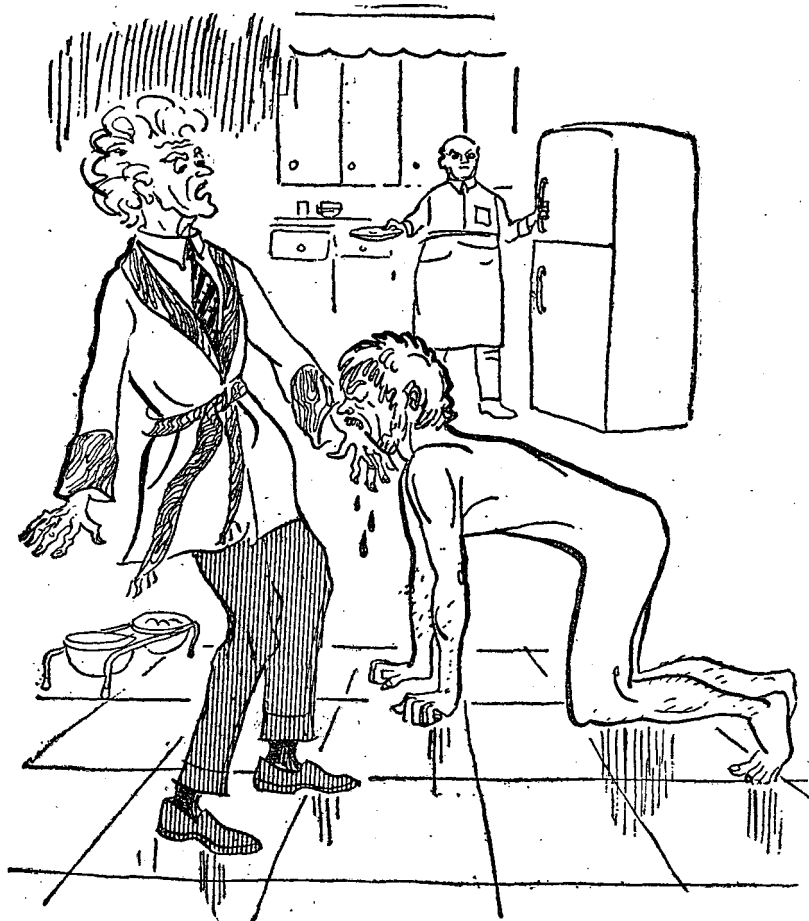
I got a good grip on him. My teeth hadn't rotted yet. I got him right at the wrist joint, and clamped down as hard as I could. He yelled and tried to wrench away, but I hung on. If I was going to be a dog, I'd be a bulldog.

William had to rescue his master. His shoe flew out and caught me in several tender places. I either had to let go or get kicked into a bloody pulp. I let go.

Release didn't stop Rothmore's screams. He could see the blood now, and there was plenty of it, dripping off his wrist. I had the taste of the stuff in my mouth, I realized then; a strange, rather satisfying taste.

Mr. Alberti came to the house. Rothmore had shouted to William to call the police, but then had changed his mind and summoned his lawyer instead. The police might mean publicity, and Rothmore was a shrewd old buzzard. He wanted to check his exact legal position first.

Although, being a dog—I had sense enough not to abandon my role—I was not allowed to join in, I was present during the conversation. "In my estimation," Mr. Alberti said, "Fido is not in breach of contract. He has acted like a



dog. A dog sometimes bites. Sometimes even bites its owner, if it's goaded. Did you goad this dog, Mr. Rothmore?"

I started to love Mr. Alberti right then and there. He was the guar-

dian of my rights. A month had passed. I should have a thousand bucks coming to me. Mr. Alberti wasn't going to let Rothmore cheat me out of it. Mr. Alberti, I realized, was my lawyer too.

A dog who bites its master, Rothmore argued, deserves to be punished. Appropriate punishment, however, Mr. Alberti pointed out. If the punishment wasn't appropriate, Rothmore might have a lawsuit on his hands, a suit perhaps involving the contract, but also perhaps both criminal and civil suits for damages besides. And the publicity . . .

Dear Mr. Alberti! Although he wasn't addressing himself to me, he knew I was taking it all in. He was reminding me that I still had rights, even in this peculiar situation, and reminding Rothmore that he didn't have the power of life and death over his "dog."

After that, it became a duel. Most of the rules were contained in the contract, but there were also rules embodied in the laws of the land. In the duel, Mr. Alberti was the umpire. That kept Rothmore from being sadistic, which he was absolutely capable of being.

Like, for instance, the weather grew cold. Rothmore said since I was a "big" dog, I was also the "outdoor" dog type. He wanted me to freeze to death, but Alberti insisted that an outdoor dog needs a doghouse. Lumber was brought up to the penthouse, and William, who was quite handy, built a serviceable structure. There was an extra dividend in that for me. Now

I had a bit of welcome privacy.

Also, Mr. Alberti pointed out, as long as dog "types" were being discussed, I was a "hairless" dog, except for my unshorn head and face anyway, so I got a blanket, too. William devised a couple of little straps to keep it on, sort of.

Rothmore was getting in his licks, too. I'd gotten a beating for biting my master, and William had to administer the punishment. He used a leather belt. It hurt plenty, but probably not any more than Rothmore's wrist and hand.

Only one beating was allowed, however. A dog "wouldn't understand the purpose of subsequent beatings," Alberti ruled. He wanted to protect his client, he explained. Would Rothmore want to pay off the entire hundred thousand if I walked out of the contract because of "cruel and unusual punishment"? No, Rothmore certainly wouldn't.

The old devil managed a few things, nevertheless, like a few cuffs with a rolled-up newspaper; now and then "accidentally" stepping on my "paws", my paws being my outstretched fingers, of course; bad food; stuff that a real dog would eat maybe, but stuff which I, even in my condition, had a difficult time swallowing—garbage.

Worst of all, though, was a game

that Rothmore invented in the spring. It was okay, Mr. Alberti said, "definitely a canine activity." Fetch the ball. Rothmore would stand at the railing at one side of the terrace and throw a tennis ball clear over to the opposite railing, and I was supposed to fetch it . . . go after it on hands and knees . . . they don't hurt anymore . . . calluses . . . back with the ball . . . in the mouth . . . where else?

"Good doggie."

Again and again, hour after hour, Rothmore sitting in his deck chair in the ever warmer sun, and me, back and forth, back and forth. Sometimes after I got tired I couldn't chase the ball fast enough and it would escape through the bars of the railing and end up down in the street below, but letting the ball get away never brought an end to the game. Rothmore always had more tennis balls.

"Good doggie . . . nice doggie . . ."

Now came the next-to-final round of the duel. It was late spring, and the contract year would run out in June.

"There's one thing this dog hasn't done," Rothmore told Mr. Alberti one day in my hearing. "This is the final thing that every master demands of his dog. If I don't get it, I will consider the contract

broken. I shall pay Mr. Kassel what I owe him and kick him out."

The sum would be far short of the full one hundred G's, of course, because I wouldn't get that big bonus at the end.

"I have fed this dog for nearly a year now," Rothmore went on. "I have given him shelter. He is not a wild dog, but a domestic dog. Long before this, I should have expected him to display some gratitude. No . . . more than gratitude . . . affection. I want to be loved."

Mr. Alberti considered the matter. Now all this Mr. Alberti cared about was justice under the law, each side adhering strictly to the letter of the contract. "I agree with you, Mr. Rothmore," he said finally. "The incident of the biting has long passed. It would be natural for a dog to show affection."

Rothmore smiled. He thought he had me now. He knew how I hated his guts. "I want him to show affection in a doggie way," he said. "He has no tail to wag when he sees me coming, but I want him to run to me. I want him to rub up against my trouser leg. And most of all, I want him to lick my hand."

"I agree perfectly, Mr. Rothmore," Mr. Alberti said. "Let's hope that Fido understands what is required of him."

Fido understood, although Fido seethed with rage—but Fido kept control of himself because he was thinking how close that hundred thousand was.

So I did it. I'll never know how I managed it, but I did somehow. How low can a man fall? I didn't know the full answer to that question till then. Licking another man's hand, that's the answer. That's the lowest depth. That's degrading in its final form.

Yet I did it, the whole bit. I ran to Rothmore whenever he approached. I rubbed against his leg as if experiencing an ecstasy of joy. When his hand reached down to pet me, I licked it. I licked that bony old corpse-hand with all the passion I had once saved for kissing a woman. I slobbered over that hand, and I didn't know which of us I hated more, Rothmore or myself.

He was saving the very worst until the very last, however. The contract was to expire at noon on that bright sunshiny June day, and he didn't spring his surprise until that morning.

I was lying naked and alone on the penthouse terrace next to my doghouse, enjoying the warmth of the air and wondering how it would feel to get a shave and haircut and put on clothes again. I was trying to concentrate on pleasant

things like that, including the hundred thousand, and I was trying not to think of the unpleasant things. Things like being certain that all my teeth had completely rotted, and the possibility that after a year on hands and knees I might never be able to stand and walk quite upright again. All year long I had tried to do a little exercise on the sly, but I hadn't had many chances. Rothmore and William had been vigilant. It had gotten worse, every time I'd tried standing—dizziness, muscles that wouldn't support me, joints that wouldn't unbend. I found myself wondering whether I could go to some clinic and have the doctors straighten me out in some kind of hot bath.

It was in the midst of such cogitations that I began to hear voices inside the livingroom, and then coming closer, Rothmore's voice first.

"It was a scientific experiment in psychology, let me repeat. The psychology of degradation. The subject is doing it for pay, but on a voluntary basis, naturally. He volunteered to become a dog, to live like a dog, down on all fours. Well, the year is up now, and I think we can say the experiment has succeeded. Mr. Kassel has become very canine. I don't know how he'll react to your camera, Miss Murdock."

I was up on my feet then, on my hands and knees, that is; and I saw legs, Rothmore's, and another pair of legs in nylons. A woman!

There was a little feminine shriek. "He's naked!"

"Dogs don't wear clothes, Miss Murdock."

"But I—"

"You're a free-lance photographer, you said, Miss Murdock. I'm

sure there are a dozen magazines that would pay handsomely for a spread on a story like this—in the name of science, of course. Man becomes dog, crawls on his hands and knees. Get busy with your camera, Miss Murdock." The voices and the legs began to recede. Over here, where you can have the sun over your shoulder."

He hadn't been satisfied to de-



grade me in private, before himself, before William, before Mr. Alberti. He wanted to make it public now. He wanted to parade my shame before the entire world!

They were standing together at the railing now, Rothmore and the photographer. Rothmore was smiling, very pleased with himself. The woman seemed a bit confused, but she was starting to unlimber her camera.

"Now, I want you to get a shot of this especially," Rothmore was saying. "He's my dog now, you see. I'm his master. And not only is he completely subservient, but he actually loves me. Watch him come bounding joyously when I call him. Come, Fido! Come, boy! Here, Fido!"

Maybe something human in me snapped at that moment. Maybe something animal, animal and cunning, took over—or maybe not. Maybe the thing was human and cunning, but either way, the cunning was sufficient to mask the hatred and the exploding rage.

I went bounding to him, all right, and it surely appeared as if I went bounding joyously. I even managed, for the very first time in my year as a dog, a bark. Maybe it even sounded like a joyous bark.

I went that distance from the doghouse to the railing like a greyhound sprinting. I forgot that I

was naked. I went straight for Rothmore, my master—my beloved master—barking in welcome, and when I got to him, though I had n't been managing to stand up straight very well lately, I managed it now. Up on my hind feet to lick my beloved master's face, to put my front paws on his shoulders, to push—and because I was such a very big dog, big as a Great Dane—I was big and heavy enough to push him right over that railing. As he fell, I kept on barking; barking as he was screaming, joyously.

Mr. Alberti, it seems, had been inside the penthouse when the accident happened, preparing the legal formalities for the termination of the contract, and he had rushed out onto the terrace when Rothmore screamed and Miss Murdock screamed. Now Miss Murdock was lying dead faint, and William was inside telephoning the police. Mr. Alberti and I were thus alone together.

We stared at each other a long time. I lay sprawled dog-like on the terrace. I didn't think it was noon yet, so I dared not revert to human status in front of Mr. Alberti, stickler for the letter-of-the-law as he was. I just stared up at him cautiously. Then, finally, he hunkered down and spoke to me in a confidential manner.

"Listen to me very carefully," he

egan, "Mr. Kassel or Fido or whoever you are. The police are on their way, and it is very important for you to decide who you are. There were three witnesses to the accident, myself and William from the inside, and Miss Murdock from out here. What we saw might be interpreted in one of two ways. If you are Stanley J. Kassel, you knew precisely what you were doing, and it was undoubtedly murder. If you are Fido, and after your long and strange experience actually imagine that you are a dog, then you acted innocently, and what happened was an accident. A dog cannot commit murder."

He paused, never relaxing his stare. I dared not speak.

"If you are Fido," he went on then, "and manage to so convince the examining psychiatrists, you will be judged to have been temporarily insane, and thus innocent of any crime. Of course you will have to continue as Fido for some time afterward. Perhaps after five or ten years of psychiatric treatment, however, you will be able to resume as Stanley Kassel. You

have very little time to make a choice."

What about my hundred grand, I wanted to scream, but I didn't make a sound.

"As to your money," Mr. Alberti said, as if he were divining my thoughts, "I think I can manage for it to be held in escrow. I am executor of Mr. Rothmore's will, and under the circumstances I would presume the court would appoint me both your guardian and your attorney. My services come rather high, and the intensive care which I shall arrange for you will cost a great deal of money, too. Functioning as your guardian, however, I shall consider it spent in a good cause. You might come out of it at the end with a small nest egg. Choose, Fido . . . or Mr. Kassel."

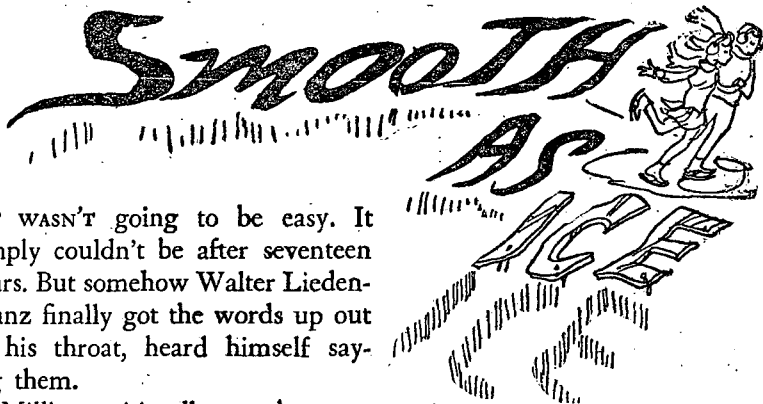
There were noises from the penthouse.

"The police are arriving," Mr. Alberti said.

He straightened up and started walking inside to greet them. On all fours, I trotted at the heels of my new master.



There is always a way to smooth a sticky situation for the good, more or less, of all.



IT WASN'T going to be easy. It simply couldn't be after seventeen years. But somehow Walter Liedenkranz finally got the words up out of his throat, heard himself saying them.

"Millicent, it's all over between us. You may have the children, the house, the furnishings . . ."

"Walter, you'll have to speak a little louder," his wife said. "I'm trying to hear the news."

Another few minutes wouldn't hurt. He waited until a commercial came on. "Millicent, I—"

"Wait a minute, Walter. Did you see that? 'Sno-Glo.' A new miracle floor polish that's like a skating rink. Remind me to pick up some next time we go to the market."

"Yes, dear."

"Now what was it you wanted to say?"

Now he had almost forgotten. Commercials certainly were better

than the programs themselves these days. "Ahèm! Millicent, do you remember that time we spent a weekend in the mountains?"

"Pinetop Lodge? Of course I remember. It was only three or four months ago."

"Millicent, that weekend had a special significance for me."

"I'm sure it did, dear. You were getting over your heart attack. I'd say that little vacation saved your life."

Confound her! Why did she have to bring up that thing with his heart at this time anyway? "You know, Millicent, Dr. Newhouse

never believed it was actually a heart attack. That was your idea. He said it was just palpitations. I've told you so a dozen times."

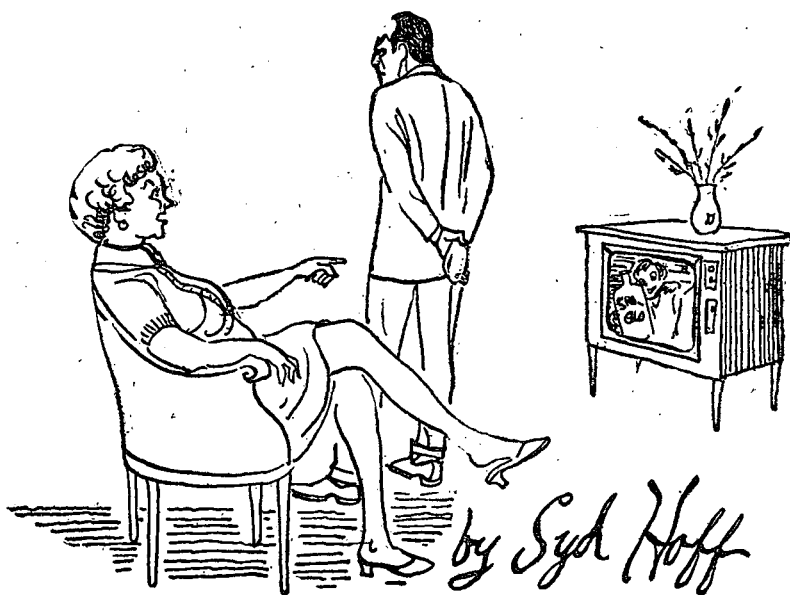
He had to go on quickly before she started giving that damn television her attention again.

self, Millicent—she was at least half his age."

"Walter!"

He stopped short. Had she guessed the rest? Women's intuition certainly was a phenomenon.

"Walter, please level with me. I



"Millicent, do you remember the couple who sat at our table in the dining room that weekend?"

"The Koestlers? Oh, yes! They were fun. We ought to go back to Pinetop sometime, Walter. I enjoyed it, I really did."

"Not the Koestlers. That other couple who sat opposite us—the Selloways. He was fat and bald. His wife—well, you said it your-

self, Millicent—she was at least half his age."

"I am leveling with you, dear."

"Walter, I must know. Do you feel all right now? I mean your heart. You haven't had any more of those palpitations lately, have you?"

"No, Millicent, I'm as healthy as a horse."

"If anything ever happened to you, Walter, I swear I wouldn't

know what to do. I'd be lost."

"Nothing's going to happen to me, Millicent. I promise you."

"Mortgage payments, taxes, checking accounts—I'd never be able to make head or tail out of those things. Figuring gets me so confused."

"You wouldn't have to do any figuring, Millicent. Any qualified accountant could do it for you. That's how many widows manage these days—er, divorcees too."

She started laughing. It was eerie. He had been expecting the very opposite—tears and hysterics.

"May I inquire what's so funny, Millicent?"

"You, dear. I'm remembering you trying to keep up with Mrs. Selloway on the dance floor. Who ever dreamed my husband with the palpitations was such a fancy stepper?"

"I asked you to dance with me first, Millicent."

"Sure you did. But I wanted you to have fun. After all, it was a vacation and you always were such a flirt, even the first time we met. Honestly, if our oldest daughter ever met anyone like you, Walter, I'd worry about her."

"Rosemary is perfectly able to take care of herself, as I'm sure my other two daughters will be when they start going out with boys."

"But Walter, you were *terrible!* I bet you don't even remember how terrible you were."

"Certainly I remember."

"Kissing and hugging in the hallway that first night! I just couldn't keep you away after you took me home from that party. Goodness, when I think what might have happened if my father caught us!"

She yawned suddenly, stretched her arms and legs.

"Isn't it wonderful, Walter, how two people can still be in love with each other long after the passions of youth have subsided?"

The commercial was on again. More about that floor polish.

"Isn't it, Walter?"

"Huh? Oh yes, the passions of youth."

He was yawning himself now. What the heck, he could always bring this thing up again tomorrow.

They shut off the television set, checked the children's room before going upstairs. Rosemary wasn't home yet. Was she really able to take care of herself? Tomorrow he'd call Mrs. Selloway—Julia—and find out if she had told her husband yet. Wouldn't it be funny if she had trouble telling him, too?

"Walter."

They were in bed now, back to back.

"Yes, dear."

"Do me a favor, will you? Make

your own breakfast in the morning."

"Certainly."

"That's a hon. I think for a change I'll sleep late."

For a change? When was the last time she had gotten up to make it?

He lay there listening to her breathing turn to snores, rehearsing it all over again in his mind. *My dear, we can't go on like this any longer . . . Those passions of youth you mentioned, actually I still have them . . . Yes, there is somebody else . . .*

No, it wouldn't be fair to Millicent to say such things, to tell her about him and Mrs. Selloway. Bad news is bad news no matter how it's said.

Far better to keep it from poor Millicent forever, let her go on

thinking until the very end that there was nothing wrong between them, that their marriage was still running along as smooth as ever, smooth as ice, smooth as a kitchen floor . . .

Why, of course! He'd surprise Millicent. Tomorrow morning, bright and early, he'd drop into the market and get a can of 'Sno-Glo' himself, spread a nice coat of it over the kitchen floor before leaving for the office. Then when she came down for her coffee at ten or eleven . . .

Household accidents were still one of the major causes of death in this country, weren't they?

Walter Liedenkranz hummed a little tune to himself as he snuggled under the covers. Then he grinned as he realized the title: *Skaters Waltz* . . .



Dear Fans:

It is always a pleasure to welcome new members into the ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, and it is very rewarding to hear from our enthusiastic and loyal present members.

Membership dues are one dollar. (Please do not send stamps.) Fan Club members will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news issued four times a year. All mail should be addressed to:

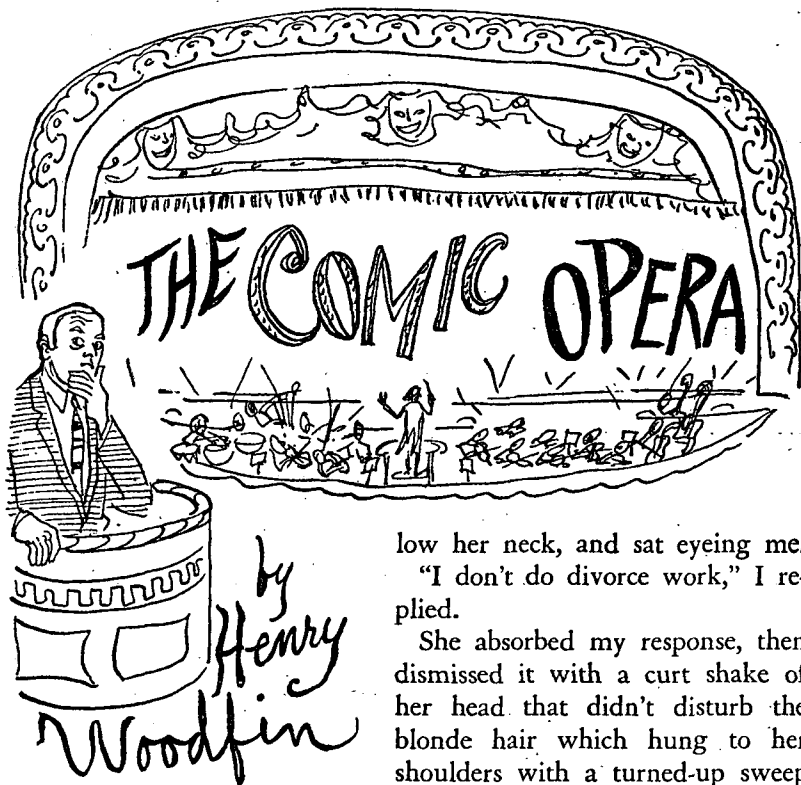
ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, P.O. Box 5425, Sherman Oaks, California 91401

I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

As Henry James saw it, the muddled state is one of the very sharpest of the realities, and has often in fact a broad comicality.



I DON'T TRUST my husband."

She said it in a clear, cold voice, and the syllables fell on my ears like sharp icicles. With a shrug of her shoulders she adjusted the flowered stole so that it rested easily just be-

low her neck, and sat eyeing me.

"I don't do divorce work," I replied.

She absorbed my response, then dismissed it with a curt shake of her head that didn't disturb the blonde hair which hung to her shoulders with a turned-up sweep at the ends. At first sight she looked like thirty, but closer inspection made a well-preserved forty a better bet.

She leaned back in the client's chair and said, "I don't want a divorce, Mr. Foley. I want to protect

my interests. To get to the point, I think my husband may be trying to swindle me out of a good deal of money."

"How?" I asked, and brought a scratch pad from the side of the desk to a convenient position in front of me.

She disregarded my question and sat in silence for a moment as if in some state of doubt. Finally she moistened her lips quickly with a darting swoop of her tongue and said, "Frank's basically a good man."

"I'm sure he is, Mrs. Brewster," I reassured her, "but I can't try to help until I know what this is all about."

She nodded her head vigorously and went on. "Frank runs the Brewster Steel Service Center, you see."

"Yes," I said, and waited for her to amplify.

She considered me for a few seconds with calculating green eyes. At any rate," she continued, "the money behind him is mine."

"Do you own the firm officially?"

"That's right. You see, before he married me he'd gone bankrupt with a company of his own. That was in Rochester, but he is still governed by the New York bankruptcy proceeding."

"I understand," I said.

"So when he married me he was

only a salesman on the road for a pipe distributor in this section of the state."

"At the time of the marriage, then, you decided to back him in another try. Is that it?"

"Yes," she said with another tongue jab at her lips. Then she smiled with an angry sort of wistfulness. "It was just after father died, five years ago. My older sister, Alice, had married long ago. Mother was dead, so that left me all alone to care for father, and that was quite a job after he had his first stroke. I'm afraid I was a little late in marrying. But then I was always closer to father anyway, you see?"

An entire story was written in the look of sharp sadness which she sent me across the desk. I decided to ignore it.

"Then, too, Frank is somewhat older than I am." She added this information with a preening stretch of her neck and a pull at the stole to bring it more tightly around her shoulders.

"Why do you think your husband's trying to swindle you?"

"Well, my nephew Dan is living with us while he goes to the university. He's in his third year now."

I pushed the scratch pad aside and eased back in my chair while I waited for her to make some sense.

"What I mean is," she continued, "we discussed it, and he agrees

with me that Frank may be up to something. That's why we decided to hire a detective, and we picked you from the telephone directory."

"To do what?" I asked noncommittally.

"Oh, to see if he is or not, of course," she said, as if it should have been obvious from the start. "My heavens, Mr. Foley, I don't want to leave Frank in any danger, if he is telling the truth."

"What sort of danger?"

"He said that on Friday night when he was working late, as he does a lot, three men came to see him in his office. They demanded that he pay them twenty thousand dollars for protection."

"And if he doesn't?"

"They said they'd see that a great deal of damage was done to the business."

"What kind of damage?"

"They didn't specify. But Frank's afraid they may break something like his shearing equipment or hijack his deliveries."

"But they didn't say definitely?"

She smiled hesitantly and disclosed a row of even, white teeth. "No, they didn't," she said softly.

"When does he have to pay them?"

"He's supposed to meet with them tonight in his office at nine o'clock. If he decides to go along with them, they said there'd be no

trouble, and they'd give him the c tails. So Frank came to me, naturally, since it's up to me to get the money, if we have to pay."

"Why don't you go to the police?" I asked, although I was sure I knew the answer to that.

"That's exactly it, Mr. Foley. I'm not certain Frank is telling me the truth. He may be trying to get the money out of me to keep on with that girlfriend of his."

"Who is that?"

She lowered her eyes and played with the fringe of her stole absently. Her legs were crossed and she twisted her ankle to display their good qualities further. For her age, they were all right.

"The girl in the office, Helen Ashcroft. Oh, he thinks I don't know about it, but I do. Those business trips—I've checked, and she's always away from the office whenever he is."

"What precisely is it you want me to do?" I asked insistently.

"I'll give you a key to the back door of the warehouse. Frank's office is in the front on the Merc Street side. You can slip in tonight. There'll be no one else there, and Frank won't have the burglar alarm set. Then you can listen in to the talk through the door to his office. That way I can find out what to do. Also, if Frank should be in any danger, you can protect him. What

er he's done with that girl, I certainly don't want anything bad to happen to him."

"Of course," I said.

"But," she continued, "the money to have is all I'll ever be able to get, and I want to protect my own interests. Don't you think that's wise?"

"Good enough, then," I said, ignoring her question. "Give me the money, and I'll do what I can. You can phone me in the morning or come here for the report."

She picked up a large alligator keychain from the floor at the side of her chair. After rummaging inside for a moment, she handed me a large key with a tag on which the word Door was lettered in heavy blue ink.

I took the key and put it in my desk drawer.

"I'll be there, Mrs. Brewster," I said. "Don't worry about it too much. I'm sure everything can be straightened out."

She frowned slightly and said, "I don't hope so. The infidelity I can understand, I suppose. But to cheat me in this way would be terribly difficult to take gracefully."

She stood erect and turned to go. Then she caught herself and moved back to face me again. "I almost forgot, you'll need a retainer, won't you?"

"A hundred dollars will do it,"

I said. "And if I finish the job tonight, that will settle it in full."

She sat down again and produced a checkbook and pen from her purse. With decisive pen strokes, she wrote the check and gave it to me. "Thank you again, Mr. Foley," she said as she went out the door.

I put the check in my wallet and sat for a while, considering the woman's story. Finally, I picked up the telephone and put in a call to Walter Delaney at the District Attorney's office. He's a staff investigator there whom I've known since the old days when I was on the force. He agreed to meet me for lunch that afternoon.

A little after twelve I found him sitting in a back booth at the Old Forge Inn. A half-empty martini glass revealed that he'd been waiting for a few minutes.

"Hello, John," he greeted me as I slid into the opposite side of the booth. "What can I do you for?"

I put him off until I got the waiter to bring me a bourbon on the rocks. After a couple of sips, I asked, "What's doing in the protection business these days?"

A gleam of something more than casual interest emerged briefly in his brown eyes. "Are you onto something, John?" he questioned eagerly.

"Don't answer a question with a

question, Walter," I joshed him.

"In your own sweet time, huh, John? Just like always. That's why you never made a good civil servant."

He drained the rest of the contents from his glass and motioned for a refill to the waiter. "Okay, then," he said, "we understand some of the local operators, Sal Minetti in particular, are working that line."

"How do they handle it?"

"They go to a local business guy, a medium-sized affair with good profits but nothing gigantic. Anyway, they send around a muscle squad. These boys threaten, and squawk about breaking the joint up. You get the idea?"

"Scares hell out of the guy," I said.

"Of course, so they tell him to pay up, and they give him a couple of days to think about it. Then they set up an appointment to come see him again."

"And then?"

"They don't show up, but some of the real smoothies do. They come on like they'll take these jokers off the guy's back." He paused and ran his fingers through the thinning brown hair on the top of his head. This was followed by a nasty grin. "The tricky part comes now. They make the guy borrow money from one of their own or-

ganizations. Well, by the end of year they own at least half of the bird's operation. You get the angles?"

"Yeah," I said, "it sounds ver slick."

"Let's order lunch," he said, and picked up the menu at the same time the waiter brought his fresh martini. "You know, I'm surprised you had to ask all this, John. We planted a story in the Saturday supplement of the *Tribune* a couple of weeks ago in the hope we could smoke out some of the victims."

"I was out of town for a week or so, and I must have missed," he replied.

We completed our survey of the menus, and I motioned to the waiter to return for our orders. Then we exchanged small talk and gossip, and Walter said nothing more about the protection racket.

However, before we parted on the sidewalk he clasped me by the arm, looked at me steadily and said, "I won't push, John, but if you've got anything on this kind of deal, it's your duty to let us in on it. These guys play rough, and it's not a one-man type of operation to go up against them."

"I don't know what I'm handling yet, to be frank," I said, "but if it's anything in your line, you'll hear a yell."

"That'll do it then, John," he re-

plied, and started away with a quick wave of his hand.

At eight-thirty that night I parked on Mercer Street, two blocks past the Brewster Steel Service Center. Mercer is a dark, narrow street occupied mostly by warehouses and small-job shops of one sort or another. Most of these operate on a one-shift basis, so by evening the street is dark and bare, with only an occasional tavern to relieve the gloom.

I parked near one of the taverns and walked back on the side of the street opposite Brewster's. It was a long building with a loading area at the side, the corrugated doors of which were now down. The front evidently housed the office. The only signs of life were the light in the opaque glass window of the office and a black sedan which was in the parking area at the side of the loading dock.

I walked around to a narrow door with a top half of glazed glass. As quietly as possible, I inserted the key and after a jiggle or two the door opened with a reluctant squeak. I turned on my penlight flash and stepped inside.

I moved cautiously past a time lock with ten or twelve cards inserted in slots at its side. All around were bins filled or partially filled with steel-bar stock. Here and there on the floor were stacked piles of

steel sheets and coils. Far up in the ceiling there was an overhead hoist.

With all due care, I stepped into the main corridor which led to a wooden door going to the office. Here I took up my post to wait for something to happen inside.

Everything was silent except for the odd creaks and groans you always hear in an empty building at night. The slight scrape I heard behind me didn't belong to that category, but I didn't get a chance to turn. Instead, my skull felt as though it had exploded and the rest was blackness.

I came around slowly. My vision first took in the legs of two chairs and two desks. With considerable effort and not a little nausea, I pulled myself erect and turned my head gently from side to side. For a second I thought it was going to fall and break on the floor at my feet, but then the double chairs and desks coalesced into one of each, and I saw that I was in the main office. It was behind a glass partition which isolated it from a larger outside office containing two desks and a small switchboard.

The office I was in was lighted only by a lamp on the desk which cast a pool of illumination across the blotter and the man's head which was face down on it. Blood had seeped from around the head

onto the blotter in a murky pool.

I picked the head up gingerly and the body to which it was attached slipped uneasily back in the desk chair. He was a man seemingly in his early fifties, with iron-gray hair closely cropped. In the

center of his forehead there was sizable hole from which the blood had oozed. The rest of the body was thick but compact.

I placed the head gently back on the blotter and looked around the office. The only noteworthy obser-



ation I made was the open drawer at the side of the desk in which I saw a '38 pistol at the front. I joggled it out with a pencil-through the trigger guard and sniffed at the end of the barrel. It hadn't been fired recently.

The rear door of the office, behind which I had stood before I was struck down, was now open. I walked back into the warehouse and made as careful a search as I could with my flashlight. My own gun had not been taken, and I held it tightly in my right hand. My effort revealed nothing except that my assailant had evidently come at me from a nook a few steps from the office door in which there was a drinking fountain.

I left the building by the way I had entered and walked out into the yard. The sedan was parked in the same spot, and I could see nothing out of order around the area. My watch showed the time as nine-twenty, which meant I had been out a little less than a half hour.

The June evening had grown cold and a light breeze blew clouds over the quarter moon which was trying to throw a dim light over the grounds. I decided there was nothing more to see where I was so headed back to my car.

The address shown on Mrs. Brewster's check was in the Jefferson suburban district. After a

twenty-minute drive I found the house on a wide tree-lined street which ambles and winds through the heart of the upper-income suburb.

The house was set back some ten yards from the street. It was a rambling, angular, one-story brick edifice. In keeping with the high-priced suburban demand for space and privacy, the houses on either side were at least twenty yards distant.

Brewster's house had a large window in front which disclosed a livingroom running the width of the house, with French doors at one end leading to what was evidently a terrace. The room was lighted by a bulky, pseudo oil lamp in the window, and I could see Mrs. Brewster standing at the left talking to someone unseen at the opposite side of the room.

In front of the two-car garage at the other side of the house a sports car was standing.

I left my car a little beyond the house and made my way back on the other side of the street. With every step my head throbbed and burned, but an equally intense anger kept me going.

The neighboring houses were lighted, but there was no traffic, and no pedestrians to observe me.

When I was across from the garage, I went over and felt the hood

of the car, and it responded with a warmth which answered my question.

Cautiously, to make no sound, I stepped around the side of the house, crossed the large back yard and slipped around to the edge of the terrace where one of the French doors was standing open.

I could see a young man, probably over six feet, with long black hair and wearing blue slacks and a dark cotton zippered jacket. He was seated, his elbows on his knees, in an easy chair in the corner of the room. I was unable to see Mrs. Brewster who was, from the sound of her voice, in the corner next to which I was standing.

"But you were supposed to get rid of it," I heard her say petulantly.

The young man looked up in the direction of the voice and said angrily, "I know, but I guess I got scared and wanted to get back."

"You fool!" she exclaimed contemptuously. "Here we've planned and schemed for your benefit, and what do you do?"

"Oh, no one's going to come searching," he protested. "It's all set, I tell you. And what would it have looked like, if someone had seen me throwing a gun off the bridge?"

"Oh, my," she moaned.

"Stop it, honey," he said and got out of the chair. Moving quickly,

he passed out of my angle of vision.

I made my own move and walked around to enter with my gun in my hand. Somehow I missed seeing the rake and, in keeping with the comic-opera aspects of the affair, naturally I stepped on the spikes, and it went clattering on the cement terrace.

When I turned to hit the open doorway, the pistol shot forced me to step back and seek shelter against the wall. I heard the woman scream.

Next, I saw the kid come out the door with the pistol in his hand. He spotted me against the wall and pointed the gun directly at me.

I knew he was going to fire, and I had no time to take aim, but suddenly his head switched back and his body crumpled on the cement from the force of my bullet. When I got to him, I saw I had taken him between the eyes, which were open and staring blankly.

I looked around and Mrs. Brewster was standing in the doorway dressed in a blue housecoat, and alternately sobbing and moaning. I pushed her inside, and she went without resistance. Nor did she struggle when I made her sit on the couch at the side of the room. She put her head in her hands and cried in racking spasms.

By the time I got to the telephone on the table next to the couch,

heard the sound of footsteps and voices coming from the nearby houses.

It was a long night. I roused Walter Delaney from his Tuesday night poker session and got him to coordinate the city police and the suburban department. I caught hell from everyone concerned for not calling when I found the body, but their anger subsided a little when Mrs. Brewster waived her rights to counsel and came through with a full confession. Funny, I think she was really more frightened by the shocked faces of her suburban neighbors than she was by the law.

At any rate, she confessed that she had become intimate with her sister's twenty-year-old son. They had plotted together to collect the rather large insurance policy she held on her husband's life, and to turn the business eventually over to the kid who, it seems, had some sort of yen to become a boy businessman.

The story in the newspaper about the protection racket had given him the idea, and he, in turn, sold it to her. I suppose his youthful enthusiasm and her gullibility made them both blind to the gimcrack aspects of the whole thing. To give the story even more credence they'd decided to hire me, or rather they picked my name at random from

the phone book's yellow pages.

They had picked a night when Brewster was planning to work late on some inventory problems, and the kid had hid in the warehouse after parking on a side street.

It may have been a crackbrained scheme, but I had to give the kid credit that he knew how to land a good blow. Two days later I still had a headache, even though the X-ray disclosed no fracture.

I was downing two aspirin with a cup of water from the cooler in the office when I heard the waiting room door open. Then came the click of heels and a tap on the office door.

"Come in," I called.

She was small, with auburn hair and a petite, well-rounded figure displayed to excellent advantage in a green summer mini-dress.

I went back to the desk and said, "Can I help you?"

She smiled winningly and came forward to the client's chair. She sat without an invitation and placed her body effectively. There was something strangely familiar about her, but I couldn't immediately place it.

"I'm Helen Ashcroft," she said, and her voice was a sibilant purr.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Brewster's secretary."

A gleam of fright appeared in her eyes, but she masked it with a

quick smile. "She did tell you about me then," she said hesitantly.

"Only that she suspected you of having an affair with her husband," I said bluntly. "But I imagine she was making that up, along with the rest of the story she told me."

Her smile broadened. "She certainly was," she said. "You see, Frank Brewster was my father."

Then I placed the feeling I'd had when I first saw her face. There was a slight but distinct resemblance to the features of the man whose head had lain on the desk blotter two nights before.

"Why the phony name?" I asked, and sheltered my surprise by lighting a cigarette.

"Well, it sounds strange, I know. But mother died when I was a small girl, and I was raised by my father's sister. When he met Jane Brewster, we decided it was better if she didn't know."

"Why?"

She shrugged her shoulder playfully and grinned mischievously. "She's an awfully possessive woman, and she would have turned on Daddy if she'd known. Daddy did so need someone to help him get started in business again after all the trouble he'd had."

"I see," I said, although I didn't exactly.

"Then that terrible woman wouldn't even get him off the hook

from his bankruptcy, but she held him and kept him on a salary just as if he were hired help. Why, he had to struggle to pay the insurance premiums out of the money she gave him."

"Insurance premiums?"

She dropped her eyes demurely to her lap and fingered the links of the gold-chain belt which went around her waist. "Yes," she replied, and looked up at me again. "Since I had so little after graduating from business college, he got me this job, and the only other thing he could do was to take out a big insurance policy with me as the beneficiary in case anything happened to him, as it did."

She took a dainty lace handkerchief from the small green purse on her lap and dabbed at the sides of her eyes, which seemed dry to me.

"How much was the policy for?"

"Fifty thousand dollars," she said shyly. "But that wasn't exactly why I came to see you."

"Why did you, then?"

"For advice."

"What sort of advice?" I inquired.

"I'm willing to pay," she added.

"I still have to know what it is you want me to do," I insisted.

She raised and lowered her eyes a couple of times and played with the lace fringes of the handkerchief.

"That poor boy, Dan," she said haltingly. "I went out with him a few times."

"Did Mrs. Brewster know?"

"No. He was going to work at the warehouse this summer, and Daddy brought him around to get acquainted. Do you understand?"

"Not yet," I confessed.

"I went out with him, and he told me how Jane was always after him."

"What did you say?"

She looked directly at me and shook her head remorsefully. "I'm afraid I didn't really take him seriously, not even when he said he thought she wanted to get rid of Daddy."

"What did you think of that?"

"I'll blame myself until my dying day, but I just couldn't believe him. Why, only joking, I said, 'I suppose you're thinking of shooting Mr. Brewster,' as I called Daddy."

"How did he answer that?"

"I'm so mad at myself. But he wanted to marry me, and he said he could afterward, but I thought he was only kidding because we hardly knew each other."

"Sure," I said. "Strangers, huh?"

"What I want to ask you is, do you think I should tell the police, and will this upset my insurance payment?"

"You should certainly tell them, and I doubt if the insurance company can stop payment as long as you didn't take part in the conspiracy, and they can't prove that you did."

"Of course not," she exclaimed indignantly. "Why, I didn't know what that silly boy was saying, actually. Still, I couldn't tell what that awful woman might say, and the police didn't mention anything when I talked to them."

"You'd better clear things up with them," I said as coldly as I could manage.

"I certainly will do that," she said. "What do I owe you?"

"No charge," I said.

She rose and said, "Why didn't I take that boy seriously? But I do thank you, Mr. Foley."

I watched her turn and go out the door. It was clear by the jauntiness of her walk how well she had understood that boy.



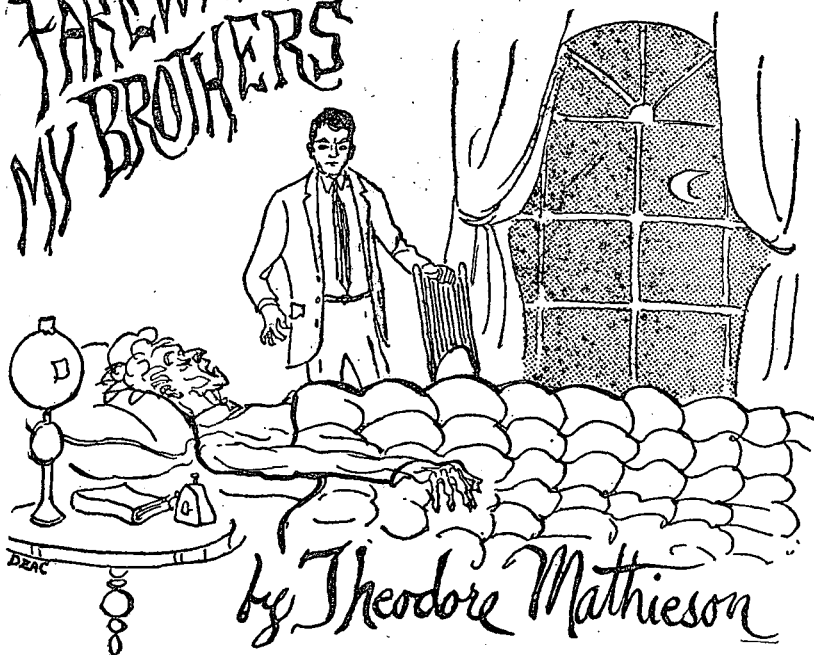
It is a discerning man, indeed, who recognizes when to say farewell—and says it.

I'VE COME a long, hard way to be where I stand now, in the bedroom of the man I've come to murder. I can hear him breathing irregularly in his sleep, sometimes gasping, as if he were having bad

dreams, as well he should, for the burden he has on his conscience.

I can hear the clock on the night table, and I know why he set it for five-thirty, just as I know many other secret disciplines of his mind; as I know the trade he plies, the inexorable and victimizing nature of it, and how it has dehumanized

FAREWELL,
MY BROTHERS



him of all hope and love, even for himself. It is a kindness, really, which I do in coming to kill him now—as well as a release for me.

I move toward the bed, drawn by the profile of the man I hate. His white hair swirls up like a halo around his gaunt face. His great powers of will are dormant, banked like sleeping fires, as he struggles to catch his breath. He will not live long, I know (the doctor says he has emphysema), but I cannot wait another day, another hour, to be released from my bondage to him. For this man has dominated my life; he has kept me from marrying the woman I loved, forced me into a profession which, though I succeeded at it because I was young, intelligent, and adaptable, became in the course of years arduous and repugnant, so now I count the moments until I may be released from it—and only the death of my father will set me free.

I sit down on the bed and as I watch him gasp for breath, I think of my wasted years—forty of them; first, as policeman walking the beat on the San Francisco waterfront, later as detective sergeant in homicide.

You may remember I solved the famous Wentworth case (the first of many) in which the Texas oil man apparently hanged himself from the

flagpole atop the Mark Hopkins Hotel, by shinnying up and fastening one end of his suspenders around the gold ball, and the other around his neck. I proved the pole hadn't been shinnied, and that the Texan had actually been throttled by his lawyer and his body juggled onto the pole from a helicopter in the middle of the night.

I met Dorrie at that time. She was Wentworth's niece, and as pretty a piece of luggage as you could imagine. For a while, it looked as if we were going to get married, too, in spite of the fact that my father was against it. Then I got involved in the Paxton murder (the chef of a famous downtown restaurant was found chopped up in the deep freeze) and when I turned around, Dorrie was gone. I always felt my father had paid her off or something, because I could never find any trace of her.

Other women came along afterward, but each time father would somehow get rid of them. I often wondered why I submitted to him—I, who was old enough to govern my own life, and doing a job in which I excelled in spite of my dislike for it; but my father was an unusual one, able to breed initiative, perseverance, and even ambition in a son whom he otherwise dominated completely. I didn't

even remember my own mother.

I finally got my way, though, after about twenty-five years. I quit the force and formed my own agency at 101 Drumm Street. For a while, business was slack and I got a chance to start raising fuchsias on the side, which is a hobby I love, but with the close of World War II, there came a demand for my services at the foreign embassies, and I got busy again. A lot of secret agents, it seemed, were infiltrating into the United States, and killings among them almost rivaled the old gangland killings of the thirties!

After about fifteen years of private practice, I felt I was getting too old for my job. I was seventy, father was ninety-something, and I wanted to quit, but he wouldn't hear of it.

"If I can still do a day's work," he said, "why shouldn't you?"

So I, poor spiritless son, kept on, but not without an increasing ennui that sapped my physical vitality. Then came the day—two weeks ago—when I fell to the floor as I was potting a fuchsia.

I knew, then, that I could never take another case. I must stop. That was when I made up my mind to do what I am now doing—sitting at the side of my father's bed, and preparing to murder him.

Yet I want it clearly understood that it isn't for his money that I'm doing this. I could always get by somehow; but my office phone keeps ringing, and people keep asking for my help, which I can no longer give, because I know that if I take just one more case it will be the end of me. I'm worked out, burnt to a cinder of my former self, and yet my father has insisted that I take one more job, and then another—and another!

It is either he or I.

I reach out now and pick up a pillow. Father is gurgling and gasping, but it does not faze me, for I have seen death in a thousand forms . . . thanks to him.

Thanks to this *writer*, who for forty years has forced me, his creation, to try to rival the exploits of such investigators as Nero Wolfe and Hercule Poirot.

Farewell, my brothers!



It needs be a wily mouse, we are told, to breed in a cat's ear.



PAUL PARK BROODED. In his darkest thoughts he wished death upon his wife.

He sat slouched deep in the leather chair, his first drink of that Friday clasped untouched in his hand. Outside, the late afternoon was gray and dense with cold, the woods surrounding the lake cabin heavy with deep snow. Five miles

to the north was the village, with people, homes, small business firms, but he preferred to sit silently with his thoughts in the quiet of the cabin, the only sound that of the crackling flames from the log fire at his outstretched feet.

Caroline was so wrong in her thinking . . .

He sipped the drink. The Mon-

A NOVELETTE BY MAX VAN DERVEER

day night encounter in their town house had been violent with raw accusations and vehement denials. It had not been a fair fight. Caroline had been too filled with wrath and suspicion, her reasoning warped. He sincerely doubted that she had even heard his denials, much less considered their possibility. There had been previous fights, of course, but none so violent and so final as Monday night. The insistence that Eva Pearlman was his paramour had been ridiculous, bordered on the seizure of any straw by Caroline to gain an end.

"I know!" she had shrilled. "I know your lusts!"

"I do not have lusts, Caroline. I have wealth, comfort—"

"But not Eva Pearlman!"

Paul left the chair and went to a window that was heavily frosted a quarter of the way up the pane. His shoulders hunched, he stood looking outside without seeing anything. He had made some decisions. He would not fight the divorce action. Caroline could file and obtain the divorce, but it was to be a quiet action. Eva Pearlman was not to be sullied. Nor would he pay an astronomical amount of alimony. Caroline would need income, yes, but it was to be a reasonable income.

The sudden appearance of the light blue sports car, shooting from

the woods to brake beside his sedan in the small cleared area in front of the cabin, startled him. He stared briefly at the sports car, then looked toward the plowed lane that gave him access to the highway. Surely there was to be a second car, driven by Caroline's attorney.

She vacated her car quickly and moved toward the cabin. A tall, straight, mature, over-sensitive woman of thirty-four years, once he had loved her, mentally and physically; now he did not.

No second car appeared, and Paul knew a measure of relief. Caroline had come alone. But why had she come at all?

He remained standing at the window as she entered the cabin. She flipped down a hood and opened the front of a white parka in a single motion. She stamped booted feet. Her inventory of the room was swift. Without a word, she entered the bedroom. He watched her open the closed door of the bath, look inside. She returned to the front room. Her lips were pinched, her eyes bright, her manner offensive.

"No one is here," he said flatly.

"Naturally I expected to find Eva Pearlman," she countered icily.

"Caroline, in the seven years of our marriage there never has been an Eva Pearlman."

Her snort was derisive. "I have a

Monday appointment with my attorney. I intend to ask a divorce on the grounds of adultery. I will name Eva Pearl—"

"No!"

She cocked an eyebrow. Her lips curved into a sneer. "Feeling protective, my dear? All right, just how protective? Last Monday evening I mentioned one thousand dollars a week alimony. However, since Monday evening I have reconsidered sanely. I have considered your income, your image among various public officials, your *potential*. And—"

"No more money, Caroline."

"Two thousand dollars a week and title to the town house," she said coldly. "That is my price, Paul, to keep Eva Pearlman out of this."

He had taken two steps toward her before he realized he had moved. His fists were clenched.

"Violence?" Caroline said, lifting her eyebrows. "Paul, do not make me consider three thousand . . ."

He continued to advance but she stood her ground. Then suddenly she stiffened, her eyes clouded. "Paul, there is someone outside!"

The words stopped him. Was this a ruse?

"I heard car doors slam," she said.

He listened, heard nothing, then took another step toward her.

Backing from him, she said, "All right, beat me. Have a witness—witnesses. I'll scream."

He waited, uncertain.

"The window," she said. "See who is outside."

He went to the window. There was only open space, the woods, the snow, and the two cars.

"Paul, I *heard* something!"

He went to the door, jerked it open. The sight of the boys startled him. They stood on the edge of the woods, silent, clustered, staring. Each held a beer can in a mittened hand. None moved. They stood like a pack of wild dogs that had ventured out of a forest. They looked mangy, hungry, and undecided, yet to turn tail under only slight challenge was not in their chemistry.

Paul stepped back into the cabin, closed and locked the door.

"Who is out there?" Caroline snapped.

"Only five boys."

"Then why did you lock—"

A mittened fist and a heavily sleeved arm crashed through the frosted window and brought a yelp from Caroline. Paul, suddenly angry, unlocked and jerked open the door. Four youths stood on the threshold. None said a word.

"What the devil do you kids think you . . . ugh!"

The fist had gone deep into Paul's



soft stomach, doubling him. Hands banged against his shoulders. He felt himself stumbling back inside the cabin. From somewhere he heard Caroline's voice: "Get out of here! You can't come in here! This is private prop—"

"Shut up, lady!"

Paul leaned against the back of the leather chair, clasped his stomach with both hands. Nausea was creeping up in him and breathing was difficult, but he had his senses, and he had the room in focus. He saw a youth with a crooked nose go to Caroline, grab her arm and twist her hand up high behind her back. She arched with a cry.

The boy laughed without humor, caught her hair and yanked back her head. He tipped the beer can against her lips. "Here, baby, have a big drink!"

Beer spilled down Caroline's front.

Then a deep voice warned, "Easy, Hank."

Paul straightened gingerly, looked at the boy in the doorway. He was a squatty, young giant, the one who had shot the fist through the window, and obviously was the leader of the pack. He came inside, closed the door, drank from the beer can in his hand, stared straight at Paul. "What's the action, Dad? Is the dame your wife?"

"M-my wife . . . yes," he said.

The boy looked at his companions. "A guy and his own wife. How 'bout that?"

The boy called Hank suddenly kissed Caroline. She wrenched her mouth from his. The boy laughed. "Hey, Georgie, tasty!"

"I told ya to take it easy," said the young giant.

"Look, man," whined Hank, "I thought you said we was gonna bust in here for a good time."

"Easy, boy, easy," said Georgie.

"Let's get the lay of the land."

"There ain't nobody else here," said Hank. "Come on, man, let's ball. We got a chick, and a fink hubby type. And if you look off there to your left, Georgie-boy, we got a bottle of booze. Man, the makin's are here. Let's ball."

"Find some music." The giant grinned. "The chick looks like the dancer type. Find a radio. I wanna dance."

A redheaded boy spoke. "I wanna dance, too, Georgie."

"Sure, Red, sure. We're all gonna dance up a storm."

"Thay," said a lisper, "howth 'bout me? I don't danth."

"So you learn, Lispy," Georgie grinned. "The dame'll teach ya."

"Georgie," snapped a surly, pock-marked kid, "I think one of us oughta smack down the old man."

Paul pushed off the chair and looped a fist. The surly kid laughed, ducked, and brought a swift blow up under Paul's jaw, and suddenly Paul was on the floor.

From somewhere, then, Caroline screamed, and a voice rasped, "Shut her yap."

The sound of the slap was loud. Caroline whimpered. Paul, conscious now of the beat music that came from the radio, attempted to sit up. The toe of a boot slashed into his ribs, sent him rolling in pain. Then he lay quiet, conscious, but his eyes closed.

"I feel like dancin'. Come on, baby, let's shake it," Georgie said.

"P-please . . ."

Caroline's pleading protest reached Paul. He opened his eyes and managed to get up on an elbow in spite of the pain in his body. The boys had shed their outer clothing; someone had stripped the parka from Caroline. Georgie was whirling her around the room while Hank stood propped against the wall, rubbing his crooked nose, his eyes speculative. The red-haired boy had the bottle of bourbon. He drank from it, grimaced, passed the bottle to the lisper. At Paul's feet, Hank grinned, yelled, "Hey, Georgie, bring the cat over here."

Georgie laughed, spun Caroline to Hank. He caught her in his

arms, and yanked her through the bedroom doorway. Caroline screamed and Hank looped a fist into her stomach. Then they were out of sight, the door banged shut, and Georgie laughed low in his throat.

"N-no . . ." Paul managed. He struggled to sit up.

Georgie snarled, "Zip, get him outta the picture!"

Paul saw the huge fist arching toward him but he was unable to move.

Paul regained consciousness slowly. He felt as if every bone in his body had been snapped, every muscle stretched out of shape. Then he became conscious of the silence that surrounded him. Gingerly he opened his eyes and turned his head. The silence pressed in on him. He felt a cold draft of air. His eyes found the shattered window across the room and, gradually, the realization penetrated. The nightmare was finished. The boys were gone.

But where was Caroline?

Paul sat up, and pain slammed against the back of his eyes. He winced and slumped. The inside of his mouth felt cut and raw. He saw blood on his shirt front. Carefully he pressed the back of a hand against his lips and then stared at the flecks of dried blood left on his skin. A tooth was loose. There

was a swelling beneath his left eye.

Slowly, he stood, probed his body with his fingertips. He did not seem as bruised as he imagined. He looked around the front room, then his eyes settled on the shattered window. Perhaps Caroline had managed to escape. He went to the window. The sports car and the sedan were still out there. Daylight was almost gone. He glanced at his wristwatch: ten minutes before five o'clock in the afternoon. He turned and surveyed the room again, took in the carelessly discarded beer cans, the bourbon bottle. There was approximately a quarter inch of bourbon in the bottle. He drank it, shuddered. His eyes settled on the closed door of the bedroom. He listened hard. There was only the silence. He was frightened at the prospect of what he might find inside the bedroom, but he turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open.

She was sprawled on her back on the double-bed, her arms thrown wide, one leg twisted under the other, her face turned away from him, her blonde hair matted against her shoulder and neck. Her clothing had been strewn about the room. She looked ravaged, beaten—and dead.

He approached the bed on heavy steps. He could not believe. His toe struck something. He looked

down, watched the empty beer can roll. His heart thumping hard, he arched over her. Then he saw her nostrils flutter. She was breathing! She was alive!

"Caroline?"

She remained silent and unmoving.

He turned from the bed. He had to drive into the village, get a doctor, find a policeman. No, the village did not have a policeman. The village was the county seat, and a sheriff was the only representative of the law in the lake area. For some reason he did not understand, it became imperative that Caroline be covered when the sheriff arrived.

Paul returned to the bed and started to pull up the top sheet. His eyes became riveted on the tiny heartbeat against her chest. If there were no beat . . . He shuddered . . . but if there were no beat, the threat of scandal involving Eva Pearlman and himself, the threat of stiff alimony payments would be gone . . .

Suddenly, Paul dropped the sheet. He flexed his fingers unconsciously, his feet unmoving, his stare captivated by the tiny chest pulse. No beat . . . He turned and shuffled to a dresser, where a reflection stared back at him from a mirror. He opened a small drawer in the dresser. Silver scissors on top of

two stacks of handkerchiefs were bright against the dimness of the drawer. Then, the next time Paul became conscious of the scissors they were sticking up from a white chest like a marker, and there was a gurgling stream of red pumping from that same chest . . .

The sheriff's name was Ben Harker. He was a craggy man of perhaps sixty years, with puffy circles below his eyes, but his movements were surprisingly swift and efficient after he had listened to the story of the beating, assault and murder. He telephoned a doctor, and then he motioned Paul out of the courthouse office, through the brittle cold and into an official sedan.

"When did your wife come up here, Mr. Park?" Harker asked as he expertly piloted the sedan over the snow-packed highway that cut a winding swath through the woods.

The question surprised Paul, and he was conscious of a side glance from Harker as the man continued. "You arrived Tuesday afternoon. You gave one of the county boys, Joe Lorenzon, twenty dollars to run the county plow from the highway down to your place and clear a small area in front of your cabin. Joe is a friend of mine. I've known him all of my life. He

stops in at the office every night."

An explanation seemed necessary, and Paul muttered, "He . . . your friend was plowing the highway when . . . when I drove in. I could have gone on into the village, hired a station operator with a jeep and blade, but it was quicker with—"

"No explanations necessary," Harker interrupted with a slight flick of a weathered hand. "But you didn't answer my question. Joe said you came up here alone."

"My wife arrived this afternoon."

"You two were gonna have a weekend of winter recreation, huh? That isn't exactly like you, Mr. Park. I've been sheriff of this county for thirty-five years. I'm retiring in a month. I'm going to Florida and live in sunshine for the rest of my days. The missus passed on 'bout five years back, and we didn't have children, so I've got nothing to keep me here. I'm going to Florida, live like a man should live; nice, and easy, relaxed. But the point is, Mr. Park, I have been around here all my life, I know this lake country, the people who use it, the people who live here. I know the comings and goings, and you and your wife never have been ones to use your cabin much in the winter months."

The sheriff obviously was not a man who could easily be hoodwinked, so Paul confessed, "Ca

oline and I were splitting up. She was to get a divorce. In fact, she has . . . had an appointment with her attorney next Monday. I came up here this week to be alone and to think. She arrived this afternoon to discuss the disposition of property, alimony. It was to be settled before she saw her attorney. Neither of us are . . . were interested in a court fight. We realized our marriage was finished, and were trying to end it as sanely as it began."

"Did you get anything settled?" Harker asked bluntly.

"No. Those . . . those animals showed up at the cabin before—"

"They're younguns, Mr. Park. Boys bustin' out of their britches to be men. Not animals. They—"

"Sheriff, are you condoning what—"

"I am not! I'm just tryin' to tell you somethin'! Those boys aren't animals, and I don't like it when you call 'em animals. I know 'em. Georgie York, Hank—that's Henry Flag—Red, Lispy, and Zip, hey all run together, have as long as I can remember. They've been n trouble with me before—not this kind of trouble, I admit—but I know 'em, and they're gonna get heir just due. I can have them standin' before my desk any time I want 'em standin' there. But they aren't animals, Mr. Park. You understand that much."

Paul said nothing in rebuttal. Harker expelled a long breath. "Now let's get back to you, your wife. I can assume that she was going to get the divorce."

"Yes."

"And you didn't figure on fightin' her?"

"No."

"You're a wealthy man, aren't you, Mr. Park?"

"Reasonably."

"You're in the publishing business."

"Yes."

"You say you and your wife had agreed to terms?"

"No. We were discussing those terms."

"You got another lady friend someplace, Mr. Park?"

"Please, Sheriff . . ."

"Your wife have a man friend?"

"Sheriff, some people just are not compatible. It may take them a while—years, even—to discover this about themselves, but—"

"That's the way it was with you two, huh?"

"Yes."

"In other words, just nice and friendly-like, you two were planning on separatin'."

"Sheriff, I didn't force her to come up here to the cabin, I didn't attack her, assault her . . . murder her."

"Okay, Mr. Park." Harker sud-

denly seemed sympathetic. "I believe you. If you had done all of those things, you wouldn't have come to me. You would have vamoosed. With your money, you could have locked up your cabin and disappeared before anyone round here would ever get curious 'bout why you no longer used the place. Or you could have packed your wife's body off into the woods and dug a grave. It'd be tough diggin' this time of year, I admit, but it can be done. Or you might even have packed her back to the city, dumped her someplace there. How are you taking all of this?"

"Not . . . very well, Sheriff. I—I think I'm becoming ill."

"Figures," Harker grunted.

They arrived at the cabin and Paul showed the sheriff inside, then stepped back outdoors and drew a deep lungful of frigid air. It was dark now. The only light came from the lamps in the front room of the cabin until a pair of headlights stabbed the clearing. The headlights went out, and a round man with a round face emerged from the car and approached the cabin.

"Doctor Gross?"

"Yes."

"The sheriff is inside."

Beneath his clothing Paul was perspiring. Flight? Had that been his real escape? He shook his head.

Flight would have pointed to guilt. He was much safer playing aboveboard, everything out in the open, just the way he was doing. The sheriff knew the boys, he would apprehend them. At least one would crack under his hammering. One would become so confused under persistent questioning that he would pile suspicion upon himself until the suspicion became a noose around his neck.

Paul attempted to pick a victim finally settled on the boy called Lispy, since he had seemed the least sure of himself. Could he conjure something now, some little word, some little deed, that would point the finger at Lispy?

Harker came outside. "You okay Mr. Park?"

"Y-yes."

"Doc's about finished. You stick here. I wanna look around."

Paul watched Harker's flashlight bob around the cleared area where the cars were parked and then disappear down the lane toward the highway. What was Harker seeking, Paul wondered uneasily.

Harker returned. "Found where the kids parked their car. They ran it off the lane back there about a hundred yards. Found tire tracks. Mr. Park, maybe you'd better get in your car. Doc's probably finished now and we're gonna be bringin' the body out."

Paul got inside the cold sedan, started the motor and huddled against the cold. He watched the two men bring Caroline's sheet-covered body from the cabin. They took her to the doctor's car, put her inside. Doctor Gross drove off. Paul watched the lights go out inside the cabin and then Harker was with him and had cracked the door. "Anything inside you want to take along?"

"No."

"I figured you didn't want to stay here tonight."

"No."

"When we get back to town, I'll call Maude Clapper at the lodge, get you a room."

"Thank you."

"You runnin' down, Mr. Park? You sound like it."

"Things are beginning to catch up, Sheriff."

"Follow me to the courthouse, okay?"

"Sure." Paul knew apprehension. What did the sheriff want now? Had he discovered some damaging evidence—something overlooked—in the cabin?

In the courthouse office Harker took a pint bottle of bourbon from a desk drawer, gave it to Paul. "Go on," he said. "Have a couple of belts. You need them."

Paul drank quickly. Harker took the bottle by the neck in two



fingers, drank, offered the bottle again. Paul shook his head. Harker capped the bottle, put it on the desk. "Those kids did a nasty job, Mr. Park. Something like that tears me up."

He picked up the telephone, called Maude Clapper at the lodge, made a reservation, then sat on a corner of the desk and stared at Paul. "I'm interested in a bloody footprint. There was blood on the bedroom carpeting and bootprints leading out into the front room. The first three prints were distinctive. Someone who walked from that room was wearing boots with

—a diamond design on the soles.”

Paul lifted a foot.

“Diamond design,” said Harker.

“I told you, Sheriff. I went into the bedroom. I stood beside the bed. I couldn’t believe it.”

“Diamond design,” repeated Harker. “It’s common. One of the kids could have been wearing boots with—”

“When are you going to pick them up? You know them. You—”

“I’ve gotta hear from Doc first.”

“About what?”

“He’s studying the scissors. Also a beer can we found in the bedroom. Doc sometimes figures himself a lab technician like the city police departments have. Right now he’s dusting the scissors and the beer can for fingerprints, anything else he can find.”

The phone rang. Harker swept it up, listened. Finally he said, “Okay, thanks, Doc.” He put the phone together. “Smudges on the scissors,” he said. “Nothing we can use. Apparently the user also used a handkerchief. Doc found lint. On the other hand, there’s a good set of prints on the beer can.”

“Do you want mine?” Paul asked.

Harker smiled, used a desk pencil to tap the bourbon bottle. “I have them, Mr. Park.”

“Look,” Paul flared, “if you are so suspicious of me, why don’t you

put me in a cell under the jail?”

“Easy,” Harker said. “I want you to consider something fresh.”

Paul was abruptly puzzled.

“You and your wife are alone in the cabin, then the kids show up, right?”

“Yes.”

“The kids come inside. They’re feelin’ their oats. They’ve been drinking. They bounce you around, raise hell with your wife, then Zip flattens you.”

“Yes.”

“And that’s when you go out of it. You don’t remember anything between then and when you wake up, stagger into the bedroom and find your wife dead.”

“Yes.”

“Could someone else have come into the cabin?”

“Wh-at?”

“Between the time the kids left and the time you woke up, could someone else have stumbled on the cabin, found the door open, come inside, spotted you out of things on the floor, perhaps been interested in robbery, looked around, found your wife in the bedroom? Not dead, you understand. Assaulted, unconscious, but not dead. This man started rifling drawers, your wife came awake, the man grabbed up scissors in a panic, killed her, ran, and—”

“Sheriff . . .” Paul shook his

lead, "... you're going too fast or me."

Harker stood. "Hell, man, I'm going too fast for myself. Come in."

Paul walked with Harker into the back of the courthouse. Harker took a ring of keys from his belt, opened a barred door, and they entered the county jail. The occupants suddenly were at the front of the single cell, their hands clapping bars, lined up, silent, their eyes watching.

Harker grunted. "Them?"

"Y-yes."

"I found them tryin' to get their car out of a highway ditch a few hours ago. I came cruising along the highway out there near your place and there they were. Car nosed off the road, stuck in the snow and them scramblin' round outside, drunk and yellin' and fallin' down and . . . well, hell, I brought 'em in, gave 'em a warm place to sober in. They don't look so bad now, do they?"

"Which one of them, Sheriff," Paul asked coldly, "is the killer?"

The boys jerked. Glances shot right and left. Then the squatty giant, Georgie, bleated, "Hey, Harker, what's this guy talkin' about?"

"Sit down," Harker commanded. "All of you. On the floor. Lift your feet. I want to see the bottoms of

your boots. You hear me? Sit!"

The five youths sat, grumbling. Paul stared at boot soles but could not find a diamond design.

Finally Harker snapped, "Georgie, which one of you killed Mrs. Park?"

Three of the boys—Hank, the redhead and the lisper—scrambled on their haunches deeper into the cell. Only Georgie and Zip sat silent.

"Somebody did," Harker pressed. "I have her body."

It was Georgie who said, "All we did, Sheriff, was have a little fun with her! Nobody killed nobody!"

"Lispy," Paul breathed.

Georgie snarled, "What are you tryin' to pull, man? Lispy never even went into the bedroom with your old lady!"

"Lispy?" Harker demanded.

The boy scooted on back to a wall. "Wathn't me!"

George stood, his face darkened with anger. "Nobody killed nobody, Harker!"

The sheriff jerked his head, and Paul started away.

Then Zip, his voice deadly flat, said, "Hey, man, you fixed us up nice, huh? You got a whole cell full of murderers. Pick one. It don't matter. Just pick a patsy, lay on hard. That's the way it is, huh? Man, you got it made!"

The corridor back toward Har-

ker's office was the longest Paul had ever walked. At the end of it, Harker turned him out of the building. Then he asked, "Why did you pick Lispy?"

Paul flinched. "Forget it, Sheriff. I don't know. I don't have the least idea."

"Lispy is the least likely," Harker said. "I've known him since the day he was born. He's a scared kid. He always—"

"And, at the moment, Sheriff, I am an emotionally upset man. I'm grasping straws, I guess. Forget Lispy."

"Sure, Mr. Park. And you get a good night's sleep, hear? Everything should look different in the morning."

In the lodge dining room that night Paul found that he could not eat. He paid the tab, weathered the side glances of lodge guests and employes—it seemed the news of Caroline's death had spread fast—and went up to the comfortable room. He stretched out on the large bed, and was staring at the ceiling when the heavy knock on the door summoned him.

He had expected to find Harker. Instead he had a stranger, a man who exuded physical strength and blind anger. He snarled, "Park?"

Paul swallowed hard. "Yes?"

"Adam York! That's my brother Georgie you're accusin' of killin'

your wife! I don't buy it, Park!"

Adam York took a threatening step into the room, and Paul was positive Adam York was on the brink of attacking him. Then suddenly York did a strange thing; he shuddered, turned and bolted.

Paul smoked a cigarette and attempted to pull himself together before he telephoned Harker. Again Harker surprised him. "Yeah," he said, "I heard Adam was up there but you can rest easy now, Mr Park. He won't come back. Adam is that way. He has a helluva temper. It gets away from him sometimes, but he just goes so far and then somehow he gets control of himself again, realizes where he is what he's doin', and bolts. He's torn up a tavern or two around here, but nothin' worse."

Paul was not mollified; rather he sat mesmerized in new foreboding. There was only one way Harker could have known so quickly about Adam York's visit. Harker had someone keeping an eye on the lodge—and Paul Park.

Sleep did not come to Paul until the early hours of that Saturday morning. Then he was awakened abruptly by the ringing of the telephone. He fought off the dregs of sleep and noticed by his wristwatch that it was noon as he listened to Harker.

"Doc came up with a good set of

fingerprints on the beer can we found in the bedroom, Mr. Park," Harker said. "They belong to Georgie York but Georgie claims your wife was alive when he walked out of the bedroom and the other two, Red and Zip, claim they were with her *after* Georgie, and that she was alive, and that—"

"Sheriff," Paul interrupted stonily, "I'd *expect* those monsters to protect each other."

There was a brief silence, then Harker sounded subdued. "Yeah," he said, "it'd figure, but I've got to prove something."

"One of them killed her."

"The last one with her, yeah."

"Not necessarily."

"Huh?"

"Any one of them could have killed her—at any time. The others are protecting. And now, Sheriff, why did you call? It couldn't be just to tell me about the fingerprints or to ask my assistance in unrambling the sequence in which those monsters . . . assaulted Caroline. I was unconscious at—"

"I just wanted to be sure you understand you are not to return to the city yet, Mr. Park."

"Ahh, I see. Has your man out front been instructed to stop me in case I do?"

"There's nobody watchin' you!"

"There was last night."

"That was different!"

"In what possible way, Sheriff?"

Harker was again silent for a moment before he said, "Well, you see, Adam York came here to the jail to see his brother Georgie, and I could sense Adam's mood and . . . well, knowin' his temper, I just figured—"

"That's lame, Harker."

"Just don't try to go back to the city today, Park!"

The click of the receiver in Paul's ear irritated him. He sat for several seconds, staring at the telephone. Harker obviously was angry. Why? And why *had* Harker phoned? Paul had a distinct feeling the motivation was beyond the revelation of found fingerprints and/or a warning.

Paul lunched in his room. He was jumpy. Harker disturbed him, and the thought of spending the entire weekend—and perhaps longer—in the confines of the lodge was disquieting. In addition, he needed fresh clothing.

Saturday afternoon was bright and cold when he walked out of the lodge. The packed snow in the parking lot creaked under the pressure of his footsteps. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a man move quickly into the protection afforded by two parked cars. Paul slowed his steps, looked after the man but all he could see was hunched shoulders and a black and

white plaid jacket, the collar turned up against the back of the man's head. Still, there was a disturbing sensation that the man was a threat to his existence.

Paul forced down the thought. He must remain calm. An afternoon drive to nowhere in particular was exactly the salve he needed.

He saw the white envelope on the front seat of his sedan before he had opened the door. He searched his memory for its content. Was it a forgotten letter he had intended to place in the mail? The envelope was not stamped, nor was it addressed or sealed. He scowled, took out the single sheet of white typing paper and read the note. For several seconds he stood shuddering, the note suddenly a crumpled ball in his fists. Then, slowly, he straightened out the sheet of paper and read again.

The demand was for \$100,000 in cash. The writer claimed to have been standing outside a cabin and watching through a window while a woman had been murdered!

Paul sat in a chair in Harker's office. He stared out a window without seeing anything. Harker, at his desk, continued to examine the note without comment.

In the lodge parking lot, Paul had been near panic. He had been on the verge of bolting, driving as

far as he could, then taking a plane, a train, a ship, anything that would put distance between himself and the lake country. Then he had regained some of his senses enough to speculate: *What if Sheriff Ben Harker had planted the note in the car to test him?*

Paul shot a glance at Harker.

The note easily could have been the reason Harker had telephoned. Harker could have put the note in the car sometime during the night then watched for Paul's reaction. If Paul bolted in panic—or if Paul had attempted to pay the money demanded—then Harker might surmise there was guilt involved. Harker might be prone to making an arrest and charge in the murder of Caroline Park. But if Paul did not panic, did not bolt, did not attempt to make payment—rather, if Paul promptly brought the demand to the sheriff's attention—then the sheriff might be less inclined to look upon this Paul Park as a murder suspect.

Paul's sense of making the correct move continued to mount as he waited for Harker. He was now convinced that, under the pretense of minute inventory of the note, Harker was clearing his mind, putting his thoughts in order.

Finally Paul said, "Harker, didn't kill her."

Harker grunted, flicked the note

Somebody says you did, though."

Paul nodded. "I can understand why you might be suspicious of me. A man and his wife talking divorce in a lonely lake cabin, a woman making unfounded accusations, . . ." Paul allowed the words to trail off, waited a couple of seconds before he said, "Let's play it straight, Sheriff. I think I have a pretty good idea why you put that note in my car. I think—"

"Me?" Harker exploded, looked genuinely surprised. "Me? Put this in your car?" He waved the sheet of paper in his hand. "Mr. Park, you're not makin' sense now!"

Paul felt a touch of apprehension. "Didn't you put it there?"

"Mr. Park, we're suddenly dealing with a blackmailer or an extortionist! I don't know what you've got in mind, but—"

"No!" Paul sagged.

"No, what?" Harker demanded.

Paul waved a limp hand. "Forget it. It's just that I suddenly can't believe that so much can happen in such a short span of time. First murder, and now extortion . . ."

"Is that what it is, Mr. Park? Extortion? Not blackmail?"

"Put me in a cell, Harker, if you actually think someone saw me kill Caroline. I'm beat down. I don't want to argue with anyone any longer. I don't want to fight anyone. Lock me up, charge me."

"I'd rather you paid it, Mr. Park."

"Wh-at?"

Harker waved the note again. "Just like it says here. Put \$100,000 in a suitcase and leave the suitcase at Nest Rock on the north shore of the lake. That's what I'd like to have you do, and then let me apprehend the man who picks up the suitcase."

"Harker, you have expensive thoughts!"

"He isn't gonna get away with it! I'll be there! There isn't anybody gonna—"

"No." Paul shook his head. "I won't even consider taking the chance on losing one hundred thousand dollars."

"We'll use newspaper, Mr. Park! There won't be real money involved! We'll cut up newspapers, pack a suitcase, and you can take the suitcase out to Nest Rock. I want this man! I don't care who he is, Adam York or anyone else!"

"That's it!" Paul said excitedly. "This afternoon . . ." Paul told Harker about the man he had watched dodge between two parked cars and disappear. "I knew there was something familiar about him! It was his back, the way he carried himself! When he left my room last night I was looking at his back, and today I saw the same back in the parking lot! What happens if Georgie York is charged

with murdering Caroline, now?"

Harker said, "I don't follow you."

"Georgie will need money!"

"Well, yes . . ."

"And does Georgie have that kind of money? Does *Adam York* have that kind of—"

"Damn, I think you've hit it!" Harker agreed.

On the premise that Paul easily might be under constant watch by Adam York, Harker insisted that Paul drive into the city on Monday and go through the motions of withdrawing \$100,000 from his bank.

"To be delivered at 9 p.m. at Nest Rock," Harker said grimly.

"So done," said Paul. Then he frowned. "But if York is watching, he must know I am here now."

"Sure," Harker said. "But I could have called you in this afternoon. All we have to do the rest of the weekend is play it cozy. I don't show undue interest in you, and you don't come around, not even on Monday. Just go ahead with your delivery."

It was almost five-thirty in the afternoon when Paul returned to his lodge room that next Monday. He carried the suitcase upstairs, then sat staring at the telephone. He wanted to call Harker, tell him he had returned with a suit-

case full of clipped newspapers. But he refrained, and at exactly nine o'clock that clear night, he walked through the cold and deposited the suitcase at the base of Nest Rock. He searched the shadows but saw nothing. Was York out there? Where was Harker?

The sheriff arrived at Paul's lodge room around midnight. He looked frostbitten and grim. He carried a suitcase, passed it to Paul. "No one came for it," he said.

Tuesday Paul found another demand for the \$100,000 in his car. This time the writer warned against going to the sheriff, and outlined a Wednesday night delivery. While he was reading the note in a semi-stunned state of mind, a bullet smashed through the windshield on the passenger side of the sedan. Paul sat in frozen panic. He was dealing with a professional. There was no question in his mind. The bullet could easily have been aimed at the driver's side of the windshield. He felt trapped. He would pay.

Paul avoided Harker the remainder of the day, drove into the city before dawn on Wednesday and spent the day collecting the \$100,000 in cash. He made it back to the lake on Wednesday night just in time to make the 9 o'clock deadline at Nest Rock. When he returned to his room at the lodge, he got on

the bottle of bourbon he had purchased in the city, and he lay on the bed and drank himself into slow, drunken slumber.

Thursday Paul awoke in mid-morning with a tremendously pounding headache, and it was afternoon before he dared venture into the brilliance of the day. He provided some protection with black sunglasses, but he squinted all the way out to Nest Rock. The suitcase was gone. He sat unmoving in the fear of the stupid act that was just this moment beginning to catch up with him. He had admitted guilt of murder—and he did not even know who his confessor was.

Paul drove slowly toward the village. He had to find Harker now, admit his fear and act. It was his lone out. If Harker discovered he had actually paid out \$100,000, Harker would probably build a case and free five boys!

Paul grimaced and banged the steering wheel. He never should have panicked over the bullet that had smashed through his windshield. He should have gone directly to Harker. He had again been given time to drive into the city, collect the money. He and Harker could have used that same time to devise . . .

Time! Paul's reflexive pull against the steering wheel sent the

sedan into a slide on the snow-coated road. He fought the whip successfully, straightened, and then crept into the village. He was numb. He did not want to believe it, but he was forced to accept it.

He burst into Harker's courthouse office. Harker was alone. He sat relaxed and comfortable behind his desk. He was smoking a long fresh cigar. It was almost as if he were celebrating something.

"You . . . you thief!" Paul roared.

Harker, unmoved by the outburst, puffed on the new cigar. "In exactly one month I retire to Florida," he said. "You, Mr. Park, probably take in more in profit in one month in your publishing business than I've been able to accumulate in thirty-five years of being a sheriff."

"Harker, you can't get away with this!"

"With what?" Harker asked mildly.

Paul ranted, "It's the time element! Why would an extortionist give me *time*—a *second* time—to collect the money unless he *knew* I had used something besides money the first time? I got the second note on Tuesday! The extortionist gave me until Wednesday night to make the delivery. If I already supposedly had \$100,000 in my possession, why give me—"

"I don't know," Harker interrupted softly. He puffed on the cigar, looked pleased. "Unless, of course, the extortionist is not an extortionist—but a blackmailer!"

"No one saw anything!" Paul raged. "No one was . . ." He checked himself in a combination of anger and confusion.

Harker chuckled. "Sometimes, Mr. Park, the price of confession and murder is high."

"I'll expose you!" Paul shouted.

"And hold yourself up to public contemplation?" Harker smoked. "In my book, a man who will pay \$100,000 to an extortionist . . . blackmailer . . . you name him . . . must be guilty of something—else why did he pay?"

"You can't prove anything!" Paul roared.

"Can you?" Harker looked

smug. "Shall we take all of this to the people, Mr. Park?"

Then Harker suddenly turned hard. "Look, Park, take it this way. It's cheaper. A stranger killed your wife, someone who never will be apprehended, a man who stumbled into your cabin between the time you were knocked out and the boys left. There is a five-minute leeway there, ten, fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. No one is ever gonna know for sure. But it was enough time for the stranger to happen along, find you and your wife unconscious, begin to rifle the cabin, have your wife come awake, have the stranger—"

"Do you actually think you can get away with such a story?" Paul interrupted in total disbelief.

"Do you, Mr. Park, want to get away with murder?"

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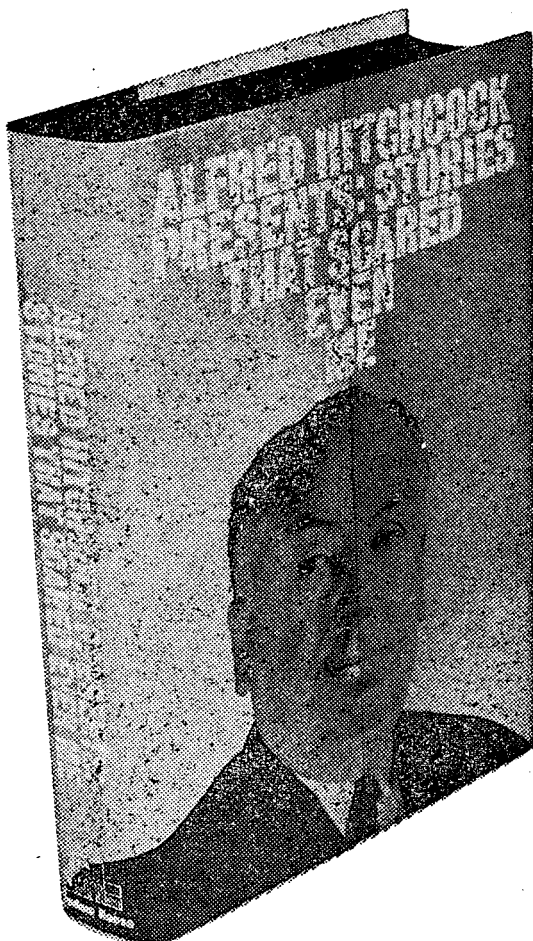
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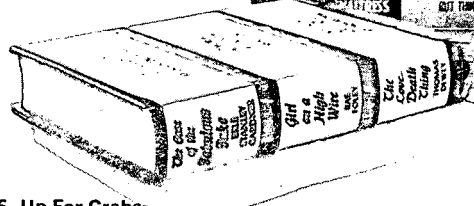
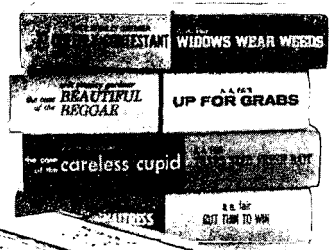
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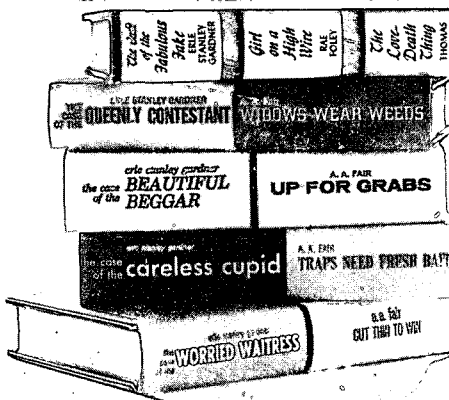
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